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WINGS OVER BURMA



THE BADGE OF No. 17 SQUADRON



The Author.

Howard Coster, F.R.S.A.

WINGS
over
BURMA

BY
KENNETH HEMINGWAY

AUTHOR OF "SHOP 7"

36 Illustrations and Frontispiece

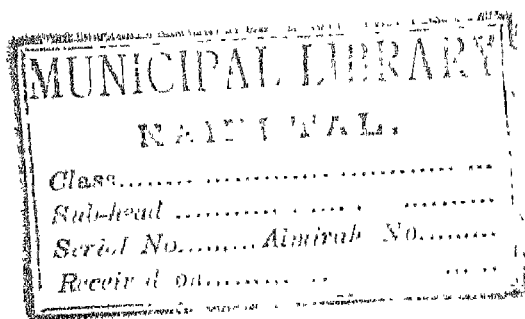
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TO
GROUP CAPTAIN SETON BROUGHALL
M.C., D.F.C.

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WINGS OVER BURMA

CHAPTER I

STRAFE

SAM TENNANT, our flight driver, came clumping into my room before dawn of May 15, 1942, to wake me at precisely 03.45 hours. I whispered through the mosquito net in resigned tones, pulled it aside and rolled upright. In the tropical climate of Chittagong it was at least not a question of making a shivering scramble at one's clothes, but that was the only consolation. Having put on my flying overall, boots and scarf and having hitched my revolver round my hips, I went with helmet and a book in hand upstairs to nudge Tony Cooper. He stretched his long New Zealand frame lazily and grunted. Five minutes later he and I, "Dimsie" Stones and "Chota" Williams, walked out of the small house which was our squadron billet and drove up the hill to Wing Mess for breakfast.

They surprised me with the news that eight of us, we four and four of the sergeants, were being sent off to catch a newly arrived contingent of Jap fighters on the satellite aerodrome of Meiktila, which is roughly south or south west of Mandalay. They had been briefed specially the night before by the Wing-Commander. We all became lively, and Chota, as usual, was almost skipping with glee. Over breakfast they gave me the details, and my own excitement boiled up, as it always does before a show. What the trite would describe as the temperament of a racehorse, but what I curse as my own bloody imagination.

There were those so-familiar canned Australian sausages put before us by the sleepy bearer in that house which had formerly housed the District Commissioner. I don't know if Australians feel nostalgic eating their own country's product! I remember that morning being fleetingly reminded of times, when operating in Burma itself, I had lived on them for days.

But to business...Driving off through the darkness, we

were contemplatively silent as we enjoyed the first cigarette of the day. The stars were bright still, the dirty, ramshackle buildings lining the road to the aerodromes presented shuttered fronts to our headlights, and the sleeping figures of the homeless and derelict, coolies and sometimes a woman and child recumbent on the porches, did not stir. Occasionally a cotton-swathed Chittagonian would trudge out of harm's way, and I wondered, as I always did, what on earth sent them roaming at that hour—we would always surprise someone! A stray "pie" dog, prone on the road, would blink up at us and then hurriedly scramble aside: we had to nudge with our mudguard one sleep-benumbed cow. Then as we sped along the river bank the shark-like sails of a solitary boat, the squat bulk of a "country" barge and a few stray sampans imperceptibly grew clearer in silhouette against the leaden surface of the water, for away East, over the Chin hills, the resurgent sun was escaping from the bowl of night.

As Dimsie swung the car on to the now desolate runway, Tony, asleep, fell against my shoulder and I dug him in the ribs. We drove up to our dispersal and our arrival seemed to be the signal for the ground crews to set the Merlins throatily burbling. Looking over the aerodrome, I could pick out their gnomonic figures; here and there, as they sat in the cockpit of a Hurricane, the red and green navigation lights flashed out a warning of props turning over. The war had started again.

By the light of a torch, inside the busti bamboo hut which we had as our dispersal, we listened to the Wing Commander reiterating his instructions and we studied against the maps on the walls. Then, "All set, blokes!" and we blunderingly hunted out all the gear we used. It included special supplies if we had to force-land in Jap territory, water tablets, a kukri for hacking through jungle, water bottle. Then, picking up helmets and gloves as well, we quietly walked out to our machines, following our groundcrews who willingly carried our parachutes. In a comradely fashion, they were as excited as we were, for the tension of anticipated action was contagious, and they back-chatted among themselves and reminded each other to, "Get your finger out."

We got in our cockpit, strapped up, and soon the engines were running again and warm. With all my gear I always felt like a papoose lashed down to mother's back. Dimsie taxied out

with F/Sgt. Bill Muggleton, there followed Tony and W/O. Bob Twine, then came myself with my four, and No. 2 being W/O. Vic Sole, while Chota was pairing W/O. "Speed" Elliott.

The note of the Merlins, as sweet an engine note as I have ever heard in this war, rose to a crescendo and the leading pair rolled off down the runway. No sooner were they airborne, with their undercarriages immediately folding up like cats settling themselves after a licking, than the next pair were already awheel; and myself; and then Chota. Dimsie went ahead, then swept smoothly round, almost over the town which was still daubed with mist in the hollows of its innumerable hillocks. We cut the corners to join up and so, in a brief time, two fours dipped smartly over the dispersal, to the satisfaction of the crews below watching us away and silently bidding us luck. I caught one glimpse of Hooper, my tall rigger, a tough, honest lad from the West of England, before looking across to grin at Chota on my left. He was obviously smiling happily behind his goggles and oxygen mask. Finally we spread out and settled down to the flight.

The orders were to refuel farther down the Arakan at a landing-strip closer to our objective. This we did as quickly as possible and then we set off east, climbing easily, for there were many miles between us and the highest point of the hills over which we had to fly. We were spread out; there was no necessity to concentrate except to keep that watch above and around—which is automatic in any squadron pilot most times—for an invading Jap. But for a brief moment of dismay when I had trouble with the starwheel controlling my long-range tanks, I was free to sit and ruminate.

Now that we were on our way I was calm. From what others have revealed, a natural enough reaction. Before the event you imagine all the fatal dilemmas that might arise; with the purr of the engines almost in your lap, the sight of a comforting steadiness of all the dials and needles, and the friendly proximity of your friend's Hurricane undulating gently, you think instead of the satisfying possibility of personally blowing up a red-roundelled machine on the ground. You are as calm and clear-thinking as a pike poised before he spurts at an unwary minnow—it's only after you have returned that you think how that minnow might have been another pike! If you return...

On this particular morning I remember studying the western hills of Burma with reminiscent interest, which might have been my mind's method of escaping from too introspective a reviewing of instructions—of ack-ack points, for example. From the north, where are the Chin Hills intervening between Burma and Assam down to Bassein aerodrome west of Rangoon, and also in Burma proper, the contours show parallel lines running north and south. Our track lay over such parallel ridges, which became higher and higher at peak level as we flew on and were mostly separated by a river in the elongated valley. After about forty minutes we would begin to sweep downwards, into a valley of similar length but much broader, through which flowed the Chindwin river joining the Irrawaddy roughly opposite the strip we had left on a latitudinal line.

Idly scanning this way and that, I noted an occasional village of greyish-yellow stone or mud buildings, huddled together as if for protection against the surrounding jungle but showing bravely a sign of human life in the sun's basilisk rays. The villages were often at some considerable height, as I surprisedly deduced, looking at my altimeter. Down in the valleys the water of the rivers flowed with a glint that belied the sweaty heat I knew prevailed. The jungle was thick as a mattress in the wilder areas, giving that impression even from vertically above, and it was only on the peaks and wedgelike ridges that there were many clearings. Even over these, however, I saw the scribble of a path, and there would be a single, indomitable bamboo hut and a tiny patch of cultivation set there neatly as a piece of mosaic. A dozen Shangri Las could have been placed in a ten-mile area there and they never would have made contact.

But this time the scene was so familiar, I had flown over it on foray a score of times. My mind went back to that memorable date in February 1942, when...

CHAPTER II

INSEIN!

THE first time I attempted to fly over the hills into Burma proper I was thrown out, almost literally on my ear! As one lone

Hurricane accompanying five Blenheims, part of the trickle of air reinforcement directed from the Middle East to Rangoon, I had taken off from Dum Dum Aerodrome, Calcutta, but somewhere past Chittagong we ran into a storm. None of us had had any experience of tropical cloud, which holds a higher percentage of uncontrollable turbulence than European cloud, and the Blenheim I was immediately flying with went slap right into this grey, anvil-shaped mass which towered over 20,000 ft. Afterwards the pilot explained that he had made for a gap to get underneath the stuff. Formating closely to him, I found it was no gap, merely a black, unpleasant knot in the whole nasty chunk. Buffeting violently, I stuck to him as long as possible, then as my altimeter needle warningly unwound I broke away.

It was one of my worst flying moments. Breaking away put me into a steep bank—I was already moving at about 350 m.p.h.—and I had to rectify the mess by instruments. Twice, after getting on a horizontal basis, as it were, but still diving, I attempted to pull out and found the weight of my extra tanks smacked me into a high-speed stall. Then I saw grey sea below, lashed to a froth by fierce rain, and I made a last effort. My machine pulled out, thank heaven, and I promptly began to sweat all over. There seemed no hope of edging under, so thankfully I went back to Dum Dum, and I found the Blenheims had all decided so too. We laughed when a certain officer there insisted that his weather report was correct, and that what we had encountered was just a myth. One myth a day was good enough for us, we said firmly, and went back to the Grand Hotel for the night.

Indeed, though I realised the urgency and was as eager as anyone to be on my way, the prospect of another good night's sleep was not unwelcome. Prior to this lap, I had come across India in two hops, from Karachi to Jodhpur, up at dawn at Jodhpur and to Dum Dum *via* Allahabad. In a bomber the pilot can sit back, get up, walk around; in my Hurricane I was stuck to my dinghy seat every second of every flight. Moreover the heat and the dust haze was wearying in the extreme. And, again before reaching India, we had been on the move constantly. As a squadron we had left England by boat when the Japs pitched into Pearl Harbour. Arriving at Freetown, we left our convoy, going by another ship to Takaradi where the authori-

ties hustled us on to a transport plane and sent us up to Cairo. The names in my logbook of the places *en route* are as romantic as one could wish: Takaradi to Accra, Gold Coast; next Lagos and on to Kano, the famed native city of 100,000 population; Maidugari, Nigeria. Fort Lamy in French Equatorial Africa, El Geneina, El Fasher and Khartoum. On our way by flying-boat from Khartoum we dropped in at Wada Halfa, Luxor, then Cairo itself. In Cairo we halted a few days, awaiting the mysterious underground decisions of the higher-ups, and then went off again by flying-boat to Karachi, *via* the Sea of Galilee and Basra. One long bustle! I was eager to get to Rangoon, if only to take root!

We had to wait at Dum Dum the next morning while the weather cleared ahead of us, but then set off in brighter mood. Some more fighters had caught up with me and there was quite a gaggle of aircraft as we kept pace with our "mother" Blenheim, climbing steadily through innumerable patches of cumulus flock. At 12,000 feet we settled down, straight and level, and droned over the vast waterways and green, fertile acreages of the Sunderbunds. After following the Arakan coastline southwards from Chittagong I pinpointed Akyab Island, and simultaneously our Blenheim turned to port and we were away over Burma at last.

I looked down with anticipatory eagerness. There was the jungle, unmistakable, and to my mind it conveyed thoughts of tigers, orang-utangs, fearsome snakes, gorillas, a steaming stench, and impenetrable undergrowth. Now I know that one of its worst inhabitants, as far as a pilot or any white man is concerned, is the giant leech which will suck a man dry as a baked chestnut in an hour. Then, I looked down at this dense green carpet, at the sharp outlines of the mountainous country, with a shudder; now I can survey it dispassionately—"...as strikes, the Player goes!"

High as we were, the western ranges of Burma seemed to rise un placably. We climbed again and then were over the last range; and before us lay the valley of the Irrawaddy! Then it was that I received my impression of the so-called mystery of the East, which I have never noticed particularly on the ground because of the evening smells of indigenous cooking, the constant parade of mangy "pie" dogs, and the ill-advised, ramshackle

combination of local architecture and occidental corrugated iron. The impression arose from my catching sight of a white pagoda, then another, and I found there were dozens, scattered like white shells on a sea-floor, all over the country. Up to a great height there was a dense haze, arising from the heat and dust, as though there had been a national, extravagant waving of incense to some multi-limbed deity. From the vivid clarity of our height the haze appeared solid. I felt the aptness of that abused word, brooding; here was the twentieth-century Tophet!

This illusion was expelled as excitedly we swooped down, down, down, over the great river itself and circled round the barren-looking airfield of Magwe. Awaiting my turn to land, I found the air at a couple of thousand feet overheated, and I bounced about like a man on a donkey. I could see Burmians working just as countryfolk do the world over; the trees were green and the earth was earth, if pale and sandy coloured; up and down the river there were boats, a steamer with a funnel and a paddle-wheel. If the latter was strange it was because of its old-fashioned air.

At Magwe we landed in successive clouds of red dust, and taxiing was a nuisance. A cheery bronzed mechanic signalled us to a temporary dispersal point and then we clambered wearily out of our cockpits, sitting in the shade of a wing until a vehicle came to take us into the town itself to meet the O.C. station. I forget his name, that Wing Commander, but he was glad to see us, and after taking down our names, etc., got us each an immense mug of tea.

His first words were, "Well, you're just in time to go back!"

We were curious. He explained how the Japs had been advancing as irresistibly as locusts. We chuckled politely, not really crediting him with a foresight which was later proved sadly correct. I was more interested in the "lungis" worn by the Burmese. These were a kind of skirt of all colours such as a cretonne curtain material. Also, the roads were thick with a grey dust that clogged every nostril and mouth. And the houses were all on stilts! However, after giving us time to finish our tea and a cigarette, he got through to Rangoon advising the R.A.F. there of our impending arrival, and so we returned to our machines.

More dust, great clouds of it, then we were off again, flying down over the Irrawaddy, but ignoring its innumerable curves and meandering currents. We became alert: this was the battle-zone and there was always the possibility... Which dispelled the matter-of-fact impression established at Magwe, where they had treated us just as if we were units of an air transport concern.

I kept a sharp eye on my position, checking on Prome, the railway, the Burma Road running down to Rangoon. Then, as we swung left away from the river and lowered our wheels, we saw the unmistakable glitter of the golden pagoda of Rangoon. I looked down on the well-made roads, the sprawling houses and warehouses, docks and city blocks, all the evidence of an ordered civilisation, and then back to the pagoda. It was not reconcilable that a modern war with aircraft blasting each other to flames overhead should be about to surge over that religious wonder, literally covered with the gold bought by the pice of the coolies. Then as I circled Mingaladon aerodrome I saw a wreck of a burned-out fuselage and wings in one dispersal pen!

Michael Osler's smiling, sunburnt face was the first to greet me. He was our squadron engineering officer, and as I rolled along the white dusty runway he drove his jeep in formation with me. I chuckled aloud, and we nodded and beamed at each other. Signalling that he would lead me to where I should disperse my machine, he spurred ahead and I was surprised to see the acrobatic little vehicle bustle off the end of the runway up on to the Burma Road. With gentle use of throttle, I eased the waddling Hurricane over the bumps and got her on the highway. Then he jumped on the wing and shouted in my ear, "Down the road, Ken, there's a crew waiting to guide you among the trees." Off we went, and as I kept a sharp look-out on either side, cars and army trucks coming along hurriedly braked and sheered off or backed away, out of reach of my whirling prop. After a great to-do of throttle and much obscure manoeuvring in my own dust storm, I settled the machine for the night.

It was the first time I'd seen a jeep, and as Mike drove back to the aerodrome I admired its obvious utility. We passed some Tomahawks with their noses painted like a shark's mouth—the A.V.G.

"Well, old Ken," Mike grinned, "you're just in time to go back!"

I had barely raised my eyebrows and "How are you? I'm damn glad to see you! Things are going fine really, except of course spares, we're in an awful mess..."

I chattered back as excitedly. He swerved right and accelerated in *joie-de-vivre* as we approached a bamboo hut with a small veranda piled with odd junk, pilots, parachutes, cups, gloves, maps—the squadron dispersal (Americans term it an "alert" shack). There was a yell of greeting from the boys. I just sat back in the seat and grinned back at them. They were fellows I had flown with, operated with, got drunk with, had rowdy arguments with, a collection of English, Canadians, Americans; with our C.O. we were like a closely-knit Chinese family. I had returned to the parental, albeit Burmese, roof once again.

Allan Carvell, a tall, robust Englishman, a friend with whom I had trained, came round from the back of the hut and grinned in surprise. I dug him in the stomach as I congratulated him on his second stripe, for he had become a Flight Commander. I remember chuckling at, and with, the two Yanks as we teasingly used to call the southern Americans, Jack Gibson and "Tex" Barriek, and the others, Wisrodt, Ken Wheatley, Stinker Murdoch, Allan MacDonald (MacDou' for short). Then I walked around to ease my aching bottom and encountered Tug Wilson's bored face, red and beaming, and the other Flight Sergeant of ground crew, "Flight" Guest, dark-haired, saturnine, but with the invariable twinkle in his eye. I grinned fatuously at the crews who laughed back with me, and then I sat and listened to all the chatter, all the news, the while I drank a cup of condensed-milk tea and smoked a cigarette. There was a mass of "gen" to absorb. Jack had done this, the C.O. had got one at night, the Japs had surprising machines... I was so tired I hardly absorbed it, but that was no matter, I was glad just to be among them again. After a while I collected my kit, which had been stored in the gunpanels, behind the wireless in the fuselage and in any vacant space in my machine, and Mike drove me back to the mess.

The road was better than an English country lane, and looked as attractive with trees here and there and the sections of paddy-fields, divided by low earthen ridges, on either side. The evening

air was almost cool, and as we turned left on to a broader thoroughfare I observed cars and traffic just as in any suburban area. The houses were timber and red brick, rather like a modern dwelling in a residential district of, say, Hertfordshire. We turned into a drive leading up to a building larger than average, arranged in a square. Within, through a garage-way, were a pleasant lawn and flower-beds. This was the mess, and Mike amusedly halted as I stood and looked around.

He left me to my unpacking, such as it was, but a little later Allan returned. He came upstairs to the room and sat on the edge of a bed, while I fiddled in leisurely manner. The bed was something like an Indian charpoy, of wooden members with a mattress formed by interlacing rope. As we talked, I slowly picked out bathroom tackle and proceeded to wash and shave on the veranda outside, from which one could have a wide view of the road, the passers-by and the neighbouring fields and spinneys.

"What's all this about going back?" I was wondering why that seemed to have been the invariable joking greeting.

"I shouldn't worry," Allan laughed, "it's quite likely though, but the situation is very confused...they're afraid Singapore's going to fall, too! These little yellow bastards have obviously been planning business for years!"

"Well, I think it looks a damn good place for us to operate from!"

"Yes, it is. We ought really to be able to hold on to Rangoon and we'll certainly have some fun."

"Heard from your wife?"

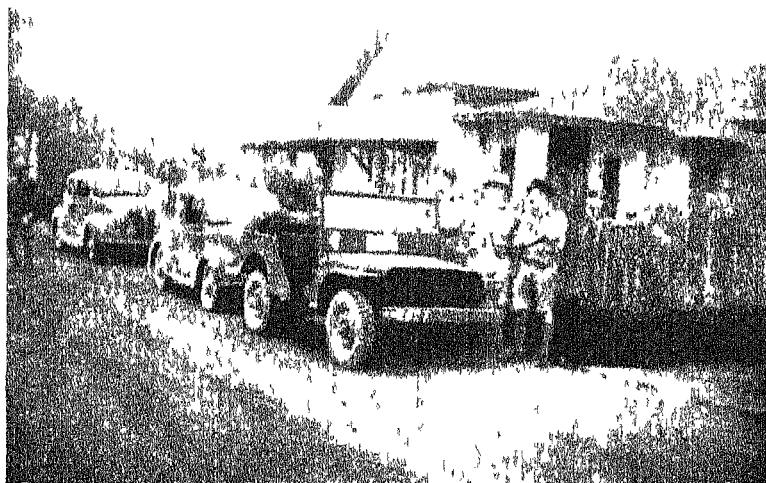
He chuckled derisively. "Lord no, you won't get any mail here. Ken, for a hell of a while yet. Have you heard from Bill?"

I nodded. "Got a cable at Karachi by a stroke of luck." And I told him what had happened. "Oh, that's tough luck," he said quietly.

He carried on to tell me of the ground party who had come round the Cape. The other Flight Commander, whose place Allan was now filling, had been separated from the Adj. and ground crews at Cape Town. With an odd half-dozen squadron pilots who had also been with the ground party, he had been rushed off to Singapore to reinforce what pitiful forces we had



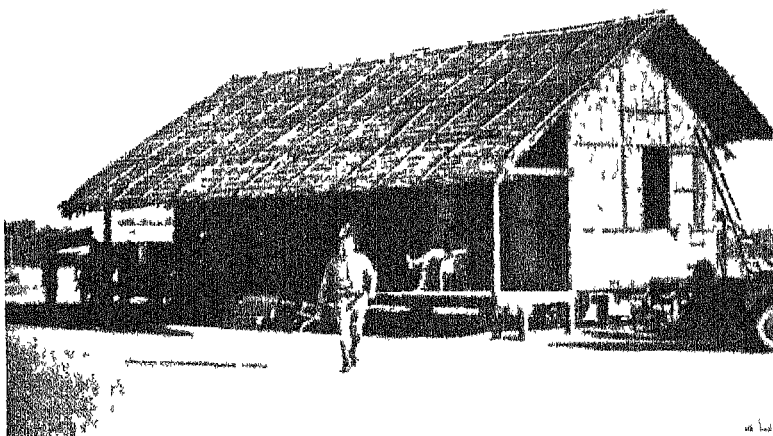
*The C.O., S/I. "Bunny" Stone, D.F.C.,
at Insein Mess.*



Arrival at Insein. Barry Sutton, Sam the Adj., and Author.



The 97 that aimed for the Blenheim at Mingaladon.



Our Dispersal, Mingaladon.

there. A year later we learned all except, I believe, one, had been killed fighting gallantly against heavy odds.

Allan then left me to finish, he wanting to wash himself, and soon I sauntered downstairs into the bar.

A cheerful, convivial mob of pilots were there thirstily drinking cold beer; the morale, of course, was terrific! Speaking seriously, though, do not be misled by my having reiterated that greeting of, "Hello, just in time to go back, old boy!" Someone said that to me again as I walked up to the C.O. It was merely an instance of that sardonic, deprecatory humour easily developed among fighting men, and certainly it is current in the R.A.F. It arose from the feeling not willingly mouthed by the service, that odds were against us but we were a good team, ready for anything, and we'd only go when we had no more machines to fly. Which was precisely what happened!

Squadron Leader "Bunny" Stone, D.F.C., my C.O., was standing in a typical attitude near the bar, a glass in one hand and a cigarette drooping from the other, talking steadily. He is quite willing to compare himself with an African personage in appearance, although I think this is half a libel. Black hair, pink cheeks when in good health, a slight frame, tremendous will power, are his characteristics. He won his decoration, as he will put it, "in the French shambles!"

"Hello, Ken, have a snort?" I did, and we stood chatting. He was talking to Squadron Leader "Slug" Weldon, D.F.C., a short, fair-haired pilot, C.O. of another squadron and famed for his Rudyenny whiskers. I looked around. There was "Bush" Cotton, our other Flight Commander, talking in his rather grim, clipped manner, very serious about these "yellow bastards"; at the far end of the bar Group Captain Seton Broughall... the shrewd, sincerely popular Group Commander, coiner of the current greeting, "Have a snort?" and the "Mighty" Sam Crothers, our Squadron Adjutant, a burly ex-county rugger player, calm and level-headed, whom it was no use at all trying to push around, verbally or otherwise. The Group Captain, who ably bore a great responsibility throughout the campaign, had once been C.O. of our squadron, and it so happened that, months later, the squadron was posted to his station in India. We were glad that he always took a good view of us. But that scene I will always remember as one remembers a particularly

exuberant party after a friend's wedding, or the pleasant gathering of companions in a pub after a day's tramping over the moors.

From scraps of conversation with members of the squadron, and overheard among others, I gathered that the Army were having to fall back to the east of the Sittang river, and it was believed that they would be able to take a firm stand. This, from our point of view, would be good. As Bunny told me, waving his glass, "It's a lovely sector to operate from, Ken, you'll find; what with the sea nearby, the two rivers and the golden pagoda sticking out like an old lady's bottom, you simply can't lose...get back to base any time."

"What's more," he explained, "when the Japs shove forward their bombers, say, to Moulmein the night before a raid, which is their practice invariably, we get news straightaway and go over and knock dung out of 'em!"

"What about our warning system?" I asked.

Bunny and Slug and the others in our group chuckled. "Oh, that's taken care of, twenty minutes' warning every time—and d'you know the secret?"

I shook my head.

"There's a dear old boy—one of the whites who's been out here for years—he's sitting up a tree outside Moulmein acro-drome, and whenever anything takes off he just taps out a signal. They're bound to get him some time, poor devil, but meanwhile he gives us warning all right. Bags of guts...check of the devil, just says he's staying there until they do catch him!"

I took a drink. That was an example of cold courage which left you feeling, in comparison, almost effete. Taking a chance in a machine carrying eight machine-guns is a little different to acting as a telephone operator with the certain reward of a knife in your bowels.

My attention was diverted to a newcomer, a well-built fellow of medium height, dressed in shirt and trousers and having a revolver slung in an unorthodox, finely-worked leather holster. He looked dusty and tired, but his eyes were of a merry, friendly shade. I wondered what was different in his appearance, then as he caught Bunny's eye and grinned and drawled out, "Got'ny beer, Stone?" I realised here was one of the A.V.G.—the "Flying Tigers" whose pseudonym was no overstatement. It

was Bob Neale, and he stayed with us to have a pint, chatting quietly with us for a half hour before going on to his own quarters.

After he had gone, Bunny chuckled, "They've no beer in their mess; we've cornered it all at the moment!" I was curious to know how we got on with them. It was natural to suppose that that tough gullimaufry of mercenaries, with their reputation, and the R.A.F. with its reputation, to maintain, might have found partnership a problem, like having too many individualists in a squadron. But it was not so.

"Thank heaven we had the sense to sit down quietly and listen to them when we first arrived," Bunny told me. "They've really been very decent to us, and as far as the pilots go we fly together pretty well."

Indeed the A.V.G. went out of their way to forewarn us against the little Jap 97's. Although having nothing like the Hurricane's turn of speed or maximum operating height, and having fixed undercarriages, they were as manoeuvrable as monkeys. Consequently we had to avoid dog-fighting with them and used the Jerry tactics of dive, squirt, away and up, then dive, squirt, away and up again. I was told of the "Zero," but Bunny added that they hadn't seen any about yet.

It appeared also that whatever the world knew about their bad eyesight and oriental incapacity of handling machines, the Japs were tough fighters in the air and flew with vigour and determination. Slug Elsdon pointed out, "Remember, though, they've never yet met an equal force— I think they do lack the ability to improvise, to meet an unexpected situation!"

Their weak points were that the machines carried no armour plate, had petrol tanks without self-sealing, and in general were of much lighter construction than Hurricanes. The fanatical spirit of their pilots appeared occasionally in such actions as bombers blindly sticking together even when several among them were being shot to flames. There was, too, the tale of one Jap fighter, damaged in a mix-up, who had come down and deliberately tried to crash into a Blenheim parked by the runway at Mingaladon. Yet, as several of our squadron surprisingly discovered later in action, their fanaticism would not impel them to ram us head-on in the air; and I found the yarn about their not bothering to use a parachute was all my eye and Betty Martin. Bush, I think it was, told me of a Jap who had

parachuted down close to the aerodrome, and of the gruesome remains after the angry Burmese had used their kukris on him.

I had another beer.

Squadron Leader Frank Carey, D.F.M., D.F.C. (now Wing Commander), was there too. I caught his eye, and we recalled how we had sat in the cabin of the ship and listened to Deanna Durbin singing "Ave Maria"—a lovely thing, which moved us almost to tears and the other chaps to blasphemy. There were members of the other squadron, Batehy, Jack Storey, Brownie whom I was to meet later in tragic circumstances on Akyab. A lovely, right merry mob! How many are dead now I don't know, although I have heard of one or two having bought it; but during that Burma campaign we were lucky.

We went into the dining-room, long, cool, with light plaster walls and dark wooden ceiling and a print of some religious scene hanging in solitary state on one side. This was evidence of the previous tenants, some body of missionaries—of what order I never ascertained—who had been teaching the local children. Oh, and incidentally, whether it had some ill-omened connection with the state of affairs to come, the name of the place, our mess, was *Insein*, pronounced "insane"!

The food was only fair, but I grumbled not. Bread abroad, in the Far East, is never baked properly, but there was some fruit, and I managed to chew the meat. Then, after a cup of the inevitable char, I went upstairs with the Adj. and in our bedroom I sat and smoked and listened to him and the Doc, Flying Officer Black, and Mike and "Nickhole," our intelligence officer, relating the adventures of the C.O. and the boys before my arrival. Sam did most of the talking, while the Doc was chaffing with the other two, but occasionally remembering to throw in a medical tip such as, "Never walk about in bare feet, Ken," in a marked Scottish accent, "you'll get hookworrrrrrrrrr!"

Sam, leisurely filling his pipe, enlarged upon the incident which Bunny had dismissed as "Awful shambles, Ken, hardly got in the air before they pounced on me and there I was—as full of holes as a cullender!"

Shaking his pipe at me, Sam said, "It was a shaky do, Ken. When the C.O. arrived with Squadron Leader Carey and Squadron Leader Elsdon, they insisted on them going up before

they had their long-range tanks off." At that time those tanks were fixed, not jettisonable. "The boys had to, really, there were no other machines here then. The truth was that they did go up, it took them hours to get any height, and as soon as they got up to the Jap's level the little blighters swooped down and jumped them good and proper."

I nodded. Sam struck another match for his pipe, puffed in silence for a moment, and then his face brightened. "After that, of course, there was no more fooling around. They had the tanks whipped off, some more of the boys arrived, and we got things organised on a reasonable basis.

"Then on January 24, they sent over a raid, and the lads really got stuck into them. This time the warning came through beautifully, and the C.O. got one bomber confirmed and two damaged. But his best effort was at night...that really gave us a thrill!" Sam's regular features smiled in recollection, and his Yorkshire accent became more marked.

The Doc looked over and interjected solemnly, "And no women, Ken, mind, I'll be responsible—they're all dangerous." He rolled his r's.

Sam placidly continued. "On January 27, they came over, obviously looking for the drone. I believe the C.O. did say that he noticed they were using night formation lights, so it shows how cheeky they were getting. Anyhow the C.O. went up...we all saw it...and there were the streaky lights of his tracer, then all of a sudden a glow and a flame and down she came. By golly, didn't the lads cheer. The crews were going about with their chests stuck out a mile for days afterwards.

"Allan, too, he did well. But he had a hell of a night of it. On one occasion he was scrambled four times—just as he was sitting in his machine on about the second scramble, they all heard the bombs whistling down. Everyone took a leap somewhere, somehow, while Allan sat there feeling like a baby at a wedding; but he got away with it and just took off after them. And was he tired the next morning!"

I asked Sam what the feeling was now in the squadron. Not that I hadn't a shrewd idea, but Sam's judgment was always a byword and everyone, including the C.O., trusted his unflurried appreciation of any situation.

He laughed and puffed at his pipe. "What d'ye think, Ken? You've met 'em all now... Why, they're as happy as one could wish. No, if the army can hang on and if we can get some more supplies, more machines, spares, as Mike will weepingly agree, we'll be all right, lad."

I said slowly, "It's the best thing that could have happened to us after having languished in Scotland all that time. We would have done damn all where we were intended for, and rotted to bits in the process."

Doe put in a word again, "Since then the lazy devils have done nothing but look for elephants!"

Sam chuckled as I raised my eyebrows. "Oh yes, he's talking about the elephants the Japs are supposed to be using for carrying supplies. They work them at night, and twice the C.O. and Bush and others have been out across the Sittang scouring the jungle for them, but they've found no trace so far. All the boys say they're really the Army's own pink elephants!" I laughed.

"How have the rest been coping?"

"Young Tex Barriek has turned out well," Mike remarked, and Sam added, "Yes, and so has Jack Gibson. The C.O.'s pleased with them both... Wheatley too. In fact they've all got together very well considering the difficulties."

An animal somewhere in the vicinity made a noise which I can only reproduce as, "Gguck-coo... gguck-coo..." I noticed the others all listened, and counted how many times it was repeated.

"Some kind of lizard!" Mike observed, adding with emphatic seriousness, "When you start hearing that over the R/T., Ken, you'll know you've had it and the Doe'll put you in the loony bin."

I asked about the Burmese; what was their attitude to us?

"As far as we're concerned, they don't worry us much—at the moment," Sam gravely replied. "What they'll be like if and when the Japs get close it'd be difficult to say. They're not for us or agin us apparently, and although they're traditionally a happy-go-lucky people, they've got a quick temper and can be roused by a slight incident. They might, if we get into difficulties, suddenly bounce up and say, in malicious glee, 'Let's wipe

these bastards out, they've been lordling it over us for years, now's our chance for a crafty backhander!' But in a week's time they'd forget all about it, and then, later on, they'd be just as likely to do the same to the Japs."

I digested that, and then as if by telepathic agreement we all got up and strolled out on to the veranda. It was cool, fragrant with some acrid-sweet scent, and the stars seemed brighter than ever I had seen them before. A long way beyond where the road disappeared could be seen a faint sheen from the town, a mere suggestion of lights like that feeling of knowing without looking that there is someone behind your back.

"Well, you can sleep quiet to-night," Sam told me. "The Japs won't come to-night, nor yet awhile."

"Why not?" Our voices drifted away into the darkness like owls on the wing. Standing there, I was reminded that I was out East, far from home, in a strange, supposedly glamorous land. Sam's answer, a matter-of-fact statement regarding the war, at that instant seemed to be merely a point concerning something remote, something that would never really happen in Burma.

"Oh, they never fly at night unless there's a good moon." Which brought me back to reality as there popped up a memory of nights spent in a shelter during London's blitz.

Sam knocked out his pipe. "Well, I'm going to bed. Come round with me in the morning, Ken, and we'll get the necessary bumph over." I followed him back into the room, undressed, and got under the mosquito-net. It was strange to me, lying surrounded like that, and to this day I've never got over the feeling of discomfort. Yet on some occasions, when I thought of snakes roaming among rafters and when, simultaneously, I heard a strange rustling in the dark, I have illogically been glad of the net.

Mike and Nickhole were already tucked away, too, when in the midst of our peace Titus arrived. Later I met him in daylight. He was a man older than most of us, and invariably during that campaign he was in the best of good humours, although he used to pretend to bind. As our defence officer he had a tricky job. Tall, slim, with a neat browned face and moustache, his eye, at the most solemn moment, could twinkle in friendly incorrigibility. I fell asleep to the accompaniment of much

chatter between him and Mike and Nickhole regarding the party he had been to, while Sam grunted and tried to cuss 'em to sleep.

Next morning, as always, the sun shone steadily—later in the day with devastating effect—but at half-seven it was pleasant, a leisurely warmth that slowly spirited away the slight ground-mist. There were ducks' eggs for breakfast because, in the East generally, the hens apparently produce poor, undersized ovals that easily go bad. I loathe ducks' eggs, the great reddish-yellow orbs coldly staring at you from within an obscene, slimy, translucent white—ugh! I've been toying with 'em now for so long that the thought of a Buff Orpington's special is just one of those dreams, like the day I shall walk into an English pub—at 12 noon sharp!

However...I soon filled in the necessary arrival forms for Sam's hard-working orderly-room, and then hopped in alongside Mike in his jeep to accompany him down to Mingaladon. In the fields we passed were coolies, wearing the typical straw hat, wide-brimmed like one of the extravagances of a fashionable beach; others whom we encountered walking along the road, the more educated, wore the "lungi" and usually a shirt of grey or coloured cotton material; while the women, who all carried themselves with natural, smooth erectness, invariably had on a white, gauzy blouse and slip underneath, and their skirts were a smart black or vivid shades of blue and red. Both sexes more often than not carried umbrellas, the women daintily holding up a suitable flimsy creation.

We swept off the road and came to a halt alongside what had once been a private house. It was built of wood in a straightforward rectangular design, and here was Mike's maintenance section. I nodded to one or two of the men as I commented, "Bit of a change, eh, Mike?"

"Yep...but it's not the building, it's the spares we worry about." He pointed out how different sections were working at other points hidden away under the trees running along the Burma Road, to the west of the aerodrome. Driving along that highway you would see Hurricanes pegged down incongruously on the rough ground among the trees. He had a few words with a corporal and then we drove off to the dispersal. As he slipped the gear in and glanced back he remarked resignedly,

"Certain tool-kits haven't arrived yet, although we've been screaming for them."

"Any local help?"

"Oh yes." He was full of praise for the Europeans whom he had had occasion to contact. "The railway people, for example, they've practically given me a free run of their workshops... produced a very fine prop kit from our own drawings, which were rough, as you can imagine."

When we arrived at dispersal I found the boys had just returned from escorting some Blenheims down below Kynaikto, the other side of the Sittang. They had seen nothing but the puffs of smoke below from the bomb hursts. Gladly they threw off Mac Wests, unhitched revolvers, and seized a cup of char. The effect of the steady heat and all-pervading dust which was repeatedly stirred to fury by the inevitable running-up of engines, was to produce an unquenchable thirst. Our ground crews boiled up char in old petrol tins, but as always they mixed it on the sweet side with condensed milk, the effect was to exacerbate our thirst half an hour after a cup.

I studied the "gen" pinpoints, patrol lines, code names, etc. on our maps, chatted with everyone, and then went over with the C.O. to the other side of the aerodrome for lunch. On the way I had a good sight of the wreckage of the Blenheim.

We were provided with food at a bamboo hut which, until it had been bombed, had once housed some of the crews and pilots. There was still a refrigerator, and so after a cold beer we sat down happily enough to canned fish, tomatoes, bread, and corned beef. One or two of the A.V.G. pilots were there also, and everyone discussed prospects. Apparently, although the Japs were quiet and had nothing on Moulmein aerodrome, they were due to fetch up some aircraft from Indo-China, for sure, soon.

As we drove back the C.O. remarked, "All those chaps," referring to the A.V.G., "are very experienced, they've got thousands of hours in." Passing by the Watch Office we noticed a cloud of dust arising from the end of one runway. The C.O. stopped the jeep. "Hello, A.V.G., are taking off. There's a scramble on!" Making sure the way was clear, he accelerated back to dispersal and telephoned Operations Room. Ops. told us, however, it was merely a bogey, perhaps a Jap recon paying us a duty call. We relaxed.

Towards the close of the afternoon I managed to get a Hurricane and flew over to the landing strip which the Blenheims were using. I think it was called Johnny Walker. We had all our satellite landing strips, some mere paddyfields chipped to a semblance of smoothness by coolie labour, labelled in like fashion, such as John Haig, Highland Queen. In the rains such strips would, of course, become unusable, and it was only because the earth then was at its hardest, baked firm as a gravel path, that we could use such an expedient. Nevertheless, these strips had the advantage of being naturally camouflaged, for they were the same colour as the surrounding countryside. Later, this saved the lives of some of our men and pilots, those who were last away from the Rangoon sector.

My trip was authorised as a "sector recon." and I found it true enough that there were sufficient good landmarks to make it easy for fighters to operate. There was the pagoda, of course, then the Irrawaddy, which was unmistakable enough despite the innumerable small waterways spreading over the delta-like area around it. To the north, the country was well cultivated for a good few miles before the jungly forests cried halt; and south one would soon come to the sea; while east was the Sittang and the Japs. Under a grey English sky, without the tropical sun and haze, the neat divisions of paddyfields, occasional spinneys, and small clusters of villages could have passed for a part of Norfolk.

I found the single long runway of Johnny Walker still under construction at one end, and after swooping down over the hundreds of coolies and a steam-roller which looked slightly ridiculous, like a forthright Yorkshireman in a harem, I landed. I wanted to contact Beeston, the pilot of the Blenheim which I had followed to Rangoon, and pick up the rest of my kit which I had stored in his machine. The aerodrome seemed at first bare of R.A.F., then an airman appeared from some grove. I swung the Hurricane off the runway, told him I wasn't staying, and then walked over to where he had directed me.

The dust was so thick that at every step I picked up enough to fill a talcum powder tin. It was putty coloured, fine, and one of the most uncomfortable phenomena I have met anywhere; and it was the same around the makeshift bamboo hut at which I found the bomber pilots. Beeston was away flying, but I found

my parachute bag of clothes and after a word or two left. They were quite cheerful, but browned off with the dust. My invitation to slip over and have a beer with us was taken as a contract.

Flying back, I circled over the town, decided I might do some shopping, and then I landed back at Mingaladon. I enjoyed flying without long-range tanks again, the Hurricane was once more light on the controls.

It was arranged that night that I should come on dawn readiness next morning, so I slipped away early to bed. This was the start. Perhaps they might raid us to-morrow. I was so excited it took me some time to get off to sleep. I could not help musing on the contrast between our situation in Rangoon and the atmosphere in India. There had been a peace-time air about Karachi, Jodhpur, Allahabad, Calcutta, like the feeling aboard a ship in convoy when you pace the deck and think of your wife at home, or one of the quiet Hertfordshire villages you knew, comparatively untouched by raiders. In Calcutta, at the open-air restaurant, I had sat out listening to a good band, drinking as much as I pleased, watching the crowd happy and gay as any in pre-war England or France. If the possibility of being bombed was discussed at all, it was as a contingency remote as a raid from Mars. It was not the people's fault. Although, a year later, they were to crouch down as London had crouched, listening for the drone of radials, at that time when we were in Rangoon the war had been kept out of India by the Afghanistan ranges, the Tibetan plateau, and the jungle hills of Burma and Malay. They were like inhabitants of a house on a hummock who still played cards behind curtained windows, ignorant of the flood-water rising up their garden path. And I remembered my wife saving an egg for me when I went home on leave in England—the menu at the Grand had about twenty items. For breakfast I could have had two, three, four omelettes, if I had wished.

I did eventually doze off. To-morrow I would need to be alert. Outside in the ambient mush of the night, a lizard cried, "Gguck-ooo, gguck-ooo..." seven times, his last note falling in pitch like a gramophone run down. Seven was my lucky number... a good omen...

CHAPTER III

FOUR DAYS

THESE are four average days, like pieces pulled out at random from stock. They are typical of how we lived before the heat of the rising sun made the Army's, and consequently our, position untenable. What with rumour and denial, alarm and lull, we had developed a squadron philosophy epitomised in the dry comment on every incident: "Ah well, never a dull moment!" Implicit in its humour were the worth-while characteristics of the Empire's stock.

Allan woke me before dawn on February 18, and quietly I put on shorts, shirt, and shoes, and had a catlick outside on the veranda, finding that I would need a battledress top for warmth, and joined him downstairs. Those sergeants detailed for readiness were awaiting us outside in the grounds, and we all huddled together in the jeep. Allan, who at first sight might give you the impression of a sober business and family man, drives with great verve. We sped along the road, and I tucked myself behind Ken Wheatley for protection against the sharp but fragrant morning air. Just above the horizon the dawn glowed like an incandescent egg-yolk through the mist that still lay smooth as the coverlet of an unused bed. We aroused a sleepy guard to lift the roadbar and finally swept down the runway towards our dispersal. Passing the A.V.G. Tomahawks, we saw some of their crews warming up engines, and a cloud of dust told of our own crews likewise engaged. Came the procedure of arranging sections and which pilot was to be in what machine, then we sat down on our tiny veranda, a cup of char and a cigarette in our hands, awaiting events.

I find one never wearies of being first out on an aerodrome, whatever the circumstances, whether it be an operational or quiet station. It is a satisfaction constantly pleasing as fishing is to an angler or country walks to a townsman. Whatever the clime, at dawn comes an expectancy, the optimism with which one makes New Year resolutions. The hangars, the surrounding country, and the aircraft all glisten as if they had been cleansed

with a bucket of dewdrops. Though it is a modern scene brushed with machinery, oils, steels, pistons, glycols, its essence is the maturing of the spirits of Drake's galleons, Nelson's ships of the line.

Minguladon aerodrome is laid down in the form of a letter "A" with the cross-stroke extended in one direction. This cross-stroke lay east to west and our dispersal was situated just outside the top of the right-hand down stroke. The A.V.G. were spread on the extension, which was halted by the Burma Road, and also at the bottom—the opposite end to ourselves—of the right-hand down stroke. Our companion R.A.F. squadron was on the east side of the aerodrome on the boundary.

The sun rose higher; the mist cleared so that we could see through the trees surrounding the area an occasional group of Burmans labouring in the paddyfields, and the telephone, when it did ring, guilelessly lacked that note of urgency we could sense so well. Eight times out of ten pilots will be on their feet, alert as sprinters awaiting the gun, when a scramble is coming through. Nobody can explain why. It must be, as someone once in mad humour suggested, "The same as when a butterfly knows there's a young poppie butterfly fluttering round for him in the cabbage patch four miles away!"

The breakfast reliefs arrived just as it was becoming hot. We jeered at them mildly, "Next time you want another half hour in bed let us know, will you?" Adding, "We'll bring breakfast down here!" I won't name, or shame, the man, but their succinct reply was expressed by his terse: "Anything doing?"

Allan shook his head. He was already in the jeep. "No, think there's an escort later—but we'll be back!" And we hurried off to the mess to snatch a meal. The distance was about two miles, and we took thirty-five minutes for the round trip, which was quick going.

When we returned S/L. Carey was talking to our C.O. and there was an air of bustle. All the pilots eyed him, and the Flight Commanders, eagerly as a dog when its master appears to be going out for a walk. The job was to escort some Blenheims on a raid. Eventually sections were arranged and I chuckled at Brownie, who sat back and relaxed disconsolately in his deck-chair.

"Like to borrow my book, Brownie...very interesting, keep you amused while we're getting on with the war?"

He slowly lit a cigarette but had to make some reply. "You can stuff your book. I shall get a scramble, and by the time you've come back there'll be two more dead Japs!"

Someone yelled out in mock disgust, "Ooh, what a line!" I turned away to listen to the C.O.'s instructions as to formation, the necessity for keeping our eyes skinned for any sight of Jap movements below near the target area, and then we strolled out to our machines. The bombers were due overhead in five minutes. We had to take off immediately we saw them and join up.

As the erk and I made off together, I happened to remark on the individual choice of attire. I contented myself with a thick shirt, shorts, stockings, and suede crepe-soled shoes, plus a scarf and the usual .38 in its holster. Jack Gibson and Bush Cotton, however, both had specially made thin leather holsters for their guns, and they looked like two bronco busters. Jack's weapon was a .45—his beloved "Betsy." Some wore long trousers, others dusty bedraggled flying boots, while Brownie, I remember, wore nothing underneath his plain black flying overall, which had zippers on every limb, down the front and all over the place. And at that time I was letting my beard grow for a wager. My whiskers were a nice sprouting reddish-gold, but on the itchy side.

It had now become so hot that I could not rest my bare elbows on the metal hood-runners on either side of the cockpit. Inside the cockpit itself, keeping motionless even, I found the heat personal, malignant. My erk hid himself under the wing, and I tried to shade my face with my gloved hands. Sweat, sweat, sweat...my Mae West was a heating restriction I was very much tempted to leave behind. Suddenly came the note of the C.O.'s machine. I started my own engine and looked skywards. Overhead, the Blenheims were sweeping gracefully round.

We taxied out amidst dust swirling like engine smoke in a tunnel. Each pair of Hurricanes accelerating away trailed a spume of gritty puttyish atmosphere like the wash of a motor-boat seen from above. We rose up, curved, and slipped into position well above the bombers and then followed them east. Mingaladon became a chalked letter amidst the green belt of trees; the haze followed us upwards, and apart from an occas-

ional glint of a waterway and straggling oases of green trees, the divisions of paddyfields down below presented the impression of a lightly-done waffle.

It seemed as peaceful up high as down below. At our eventual height of 18,000 ft. we were well above the haze, which reaches, incidentally, 8,000 ft. or even 10,000 ft. on the hottest days of the dry season. Indeed it was a pleasure to fly. The clarity of the air had the refreshing cerulean shade of a limpid Highland burn, and the temperature was as coldly stimulating. Every now and then I caught the flash of the eggshell blue of the underside of Ken Wheatley's machine. Being among that squadron of modern machines on patrol was like being able to cavort with the swallows in spring, such was the sense of control, or being able to slip hither, thither, at one's slightest whim. That was one of the beauties of flying, though every second our eyes scanned the sky, above, below, around, for the enemy!

We soon crossed over the Gulf of Martaban, the waters of which from our unique viewpoint were revealed with their vast muddied currents like a wash of a blue, grey, and ochre oils in the mixing. Then we arrived beyond the Sittang, where we could see the line of small hills around Kyaikto way and the road running parallel which came from Moulmein direction.

The bombers made a run, and in detached interest I watched a small cluster of village huts, a mere drawing-pin head to my eye, of a sudden erupt with several whorls of smoke. The whorls lost outline, became a drifting screen, although from some of the bomb points there very soon appeared a flame like the glow of a cigar end in the night.

The silence in which we wheeled above, vulture-like, was the silence of a house being burgled. We refused to believe our wary eyes that told us there was *nothing about*. In that silence, which is true enough, for you become so used to the engine noise your mind ignores it and you might just as well be in the gods of an empty theatre, I fancied I could almost hear the crackle of the flames down below. I peered fiercely down on village and paddyfield, fringes of jungle forest and creeks and coastline, but could make out nothing to do with the war simmering down there. Make no mistake, in jungle warfare the Jap is skilled; he uses cover as the robbers and assassins used the catacombs of Paris. Indeed, the only war-like phenomenon I could pick out among

the vast acreage within our ken was a natural one, an occasional forest fire, which frequently spontaneously combusts in Burma during the dry season.

As the Blenheims made a second run, I counted the bomb bursts again, and then, after one sweep round while our charges sped away, the C.O. led us back to base. Coming within sight of Dagwe pagoda once more, I heard over my R/T. a tap-tap of someone signalling. I had noticed it before, as we all had, in fact. It was believed to be a set operating from within Rangoon itself, some fifth columnist passing over to the Japs details of our movements.

The bombers broke away towards their own field and one after the other we ourselves, bellies showing like the roll of porpoises, peeled off and swooped down to Mingaladon. Another hour and twenty minutes in our log-books.

Coming down from that height was like walking from the outer air into a card room in the middle of winter. The heat ripples the air, and we immediately began sweating again. By the time I had swung the tail of Z round and switched off my engine I was wet in my hair, down my spine, at the back of my knees. We bellowed for char!

"See anything, you chaps?" the C.O. asked as after flinging off our Mac Wests we got under the shade of the hut and sipped away. None of us had anything to report to Nickhole and the A.L.O. except that we were able to give a check as to whether the bombers had straddled their target well enough.

After lunch there was another escort job, but I had to stay behind. Brownie gleefully sneered at me as he left. "The first shall be last!"

I pulled a face. His fair-complexioned visage with its trim, brown moustache bared white teeth at me.

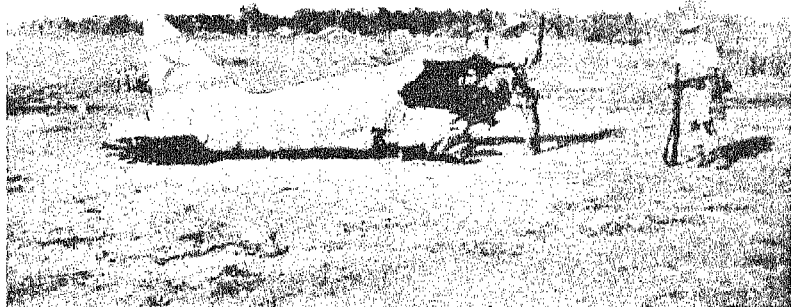
Such of us who remained arranged out kit in the machine left behind and came on readiness. We would take off with the A.V.G. if we were raided. I usually hung my parachute on the wingtip, but I had to walk over to Z to see that was shaded from the fierce sun by a cloth. Also, checking that the damp cloths over the gun-panels—helping to cool our explosive ammunition—had been watered afresh, I spent a few moments on the machine and then returned with the erk to dispersal and flopped down on the veranda.



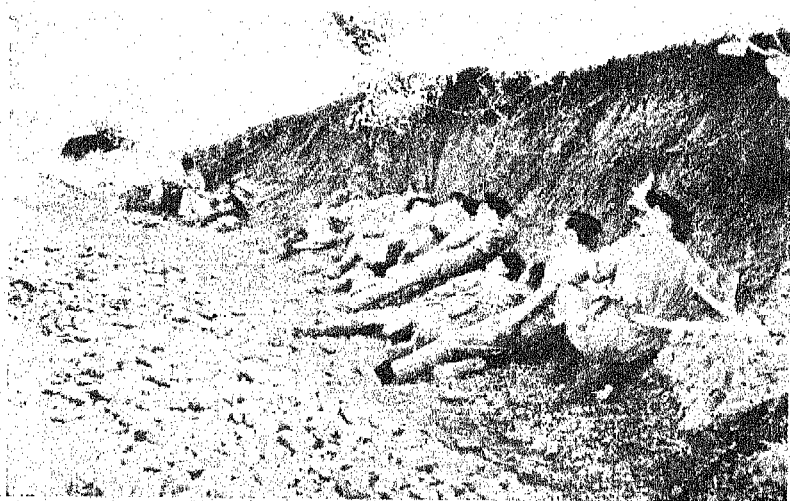
Me and my Beard at Rangoon (Author).



Our telephone · Johnny Walker, Bob Neale, A.V.G., on the Bloccn.



One of the "Confirmed" by Rangoon.



The boys in the "trench," Magwe. Nearest is "Slinker" Murdoch. Author is among them—burrowing! Jap fighters were around.

The dust, and the drone of Merlins slowly dying away, the aerodrome became as somnolent as we felt. I well appreciate now the tropical custom of the afternoon nap. With the departure of the fighters, it seemed as though armistice had been declared—and the telephone, for once, kept quiet. We sat there idly looking at ragged magazines or just sitting—from inside I could hear the voices of the two Texes, Barriek and Wisrodt, arguing over a game of cards—and the sudden, seeming normality of the aerodrome scene after our trip was like coming out of an afternoon cinema show and arriving home again. The minutes passed stealthily and then, typically, the sky all of a sudden was filled with aircraft. In came a D.C. transport plane, a Hurricane, and a Tomahawk. One moment the sky held nothing but silent, circling kites, next these aircraft popped up over the horizon and went humming round and round, each trying to land first.

We watched the Hurricane with interest. Whose was it ?

Bush appeared from the back of the hut where he had been cleaning his revolver and frowningly looked across. "Why, that's one of ours. Who's in D ?"

When the machine taxied up to roost it transpired All MacDou' had had to return with glycol trouble. We muttered, "Hum, too blessed hot in this place." But our moan was ordinary comment, something to bind about.

Meanwhile, the transport had landed in its comparatively slow, dignified manner and had parked by the Watch Office at the intersection. I could just make out a small throng of people—civilians, including women in bright print dresses. Even from where I was sitting they gave the impression of being eager to scramble into the plane. So they were getting the civilians away, eh ? Well, good thing, if there were women and kids it was quite unnecessary to keep them down at Rangoon in the circumstances. I got myself another cup of char.

The boys returned. We sat up as the throaty roar became all-pervading with its peculiar resonant quality. Critically we watched them position themselves and come purring down, one after the other, so that by the time the C.O.'s machine was turning to taxi back the last machine was just touching down. It showed the whole squadron up if, in front of the A.V.G. and our

rival squadron, one of us failed to "grease her on smoothly as a bricklayer trowels mortar!"

Again, they had seen nothing.

"Japs must be celebrating the old Emperor's birthday—or they've found a new lot of Malayan popsies!" the C.O. laughed, not able to spare the time to slip off his Mac West before sipping at his tea.

Ken Wheatley had a theory, one of his crazy, Canadian, shaggy-dog explanations. "No, sir, I know just what it is. It's the Emperor's birthday week, yes; but he's had all his pilots back and filled 'em full of saki, all except the duty pilot, Moulmein, and the D.P.'s so brassed off at being left behind he's going to put the aerodrome U/S. and gone off sulking in the jungle to commit hari-kari all on his own!"

We looked at Ken. "Well?"

He solemnly concluded his hypothesis, "Well, so until they get a new duty pilot—in about a week's time—the naughty Nippons won't be able to use Moulmein and they'll have to stay at Tokyo!"

The C.O. swallowed some tea, swished the leaves round the bottom of the cup and then asked, "Anyone got any ammunition to spare?"

Ken backed away. "You don't think that's what it is, eh, fellers?" Disappearing round the corner with two of us chasing him, "Neither do I—O. Kaa...aay, fellers, I'll go quietly..."

The telephone rang, and we listened intently as the C.O. grabbed it. "Hello!...yes, yes..." A pause. "Yes, I'll send a section off in about a quarter of an hour."

He turned and grinned at us. "Bush, you take...mm, let me see...take Ken along with you and see if you can find those blasted pink elephants. The Army's gnattering about them again. I'm brownd off, you see if you can catch them!"

Catching sight of the "Gritty" on my Mac West—I had been christened thus by Ricky Chadwick's wife at a W.A.A.F. party back home—I picked it up and smugly exclaimed for Brownie's benefit, "Thank you, sir...there, you see, virtue never goes unrewarded!"

Tex Barrick gasped. "Oh—you stink, Gritty!"

So Bush and I set off. It was about five, and the sun was setting and shone on our backs as we flew east. Bush kept at

about 1,000 ft. until we came to the water of the Gulf and then we increased speed, heading for a gap in the line of hills opposite, through which we swooped down close to ground as marauding Red Indians over the suspected area—Mewaing. Past my vision, through the bullet-proof glass windscreen, flashed a panorama of green jungle trees, clearings where stood groups of simple village dwellings, a winding river and the smaller expanses, this being wilder country, of cultivated ground. We accelerated up and down, around and about, on one line of search I became separated from Bush and it was most extraordinary and comforting to realise how difficult the camouflage of our Hurricanes, blending with the jungle country, would make the task of any Japs patrolling above. Only as I saw a brief flash of his machine crossing the river did I pick up Bush again. But of the elephants there was nary a sign. All beneath was silent, and even the villages were deserted.

Yet the Japs were there, the Army knew!

I thought to myself I was damned if I'd like to have to lob down. I received an impression of numberless eyes watching me from behind trees, from the midst of the dense foliage, from in between cracks in the bamboo huts! The same countless number of eyes that confront you when you stand on a beach and the crabs from their holes stare sullenly at you!

Once I thought I caught sight of a suspicious movement beneath some trees fringing a village. I also made out, as I circled warily, the glow of some fires and what I imagined could be the limbs of some animals—maybe pack mules? So I made a run and fired a medium burst at the spot just to show there was lots of ill-feeling. I was intent at the time, absorbed as a solitary gun stalking rabbits, but afterwards I reflected regretfully it might have been merely some scared Burmese farmers.

Then I pushed forward the throttle and sped after Bush, whom I still had in sight, well away, curving energetically this way and that towards the direction of Moulmein. We swept together round the base of the hills, across the open country there, where we suspiciously eyed the occasional sampans beached up the creeks and finally headed out to sea again back to base. Over that last stretch of country all the time I searched I was estimating the chances, if one collected a stray bullet from some unseen Jap and had to force land, of running like hell and

hiding until nightfall. The country was open, unless you crashed down in a deserted area, more than likely you would be picked up. We knew that the Burmese around that vicinity were problematical. Like most onlookers, they tended to favour the winner.

The familiar road and parallel irrigation channel which led us to Rangoon came underneath. It was comforting to be back nearly home. I could see that mug of beer in the mess bar already! As we approached the aerodrome the sun, low, now, was directly in the arc of our propellers. The light shimmered around me warmly, and we moved forward gropingly, but easily, like men closing their eyes during the peace of a walk over familiar downs.

Throttle back, wheels down, flaps down—and I followed Bush in, gliding on to a runway of light! In actual fact, not being able to judge my height accurately because of the sun's rays, I made a bouncy landing.

Another day's work done. I felt content and gaily rested my arms on the sides of the cockpit as I taxied back, rather in the mood of an errand-boy riding his cycle hands off. Ops. telephoned our release, and we fought each other into the jeep and roared back to the mess, yippeeing at any Burman we overtook.

We were all in particularly happy mood that evening after washing and changing, despite the latter being rare and a matter of luck—if you had a clean shirt to put on! The A.V.G. dropped along in force, some of Group staff looked in, while Doc, looking slightly embarrassed and whispering aside to us, "Now come and be sociable, you bastards!" brought in the Matron and some of the nurses of the hospital. The Matron I admired for a dear, indomitable lady, who should have been packed away to a hospital in a more ordered area, not sent right forward. And, of course, the boys tried to get off with the young nurses. Two succeeded, but no names, no recriminations...

The sensation of the evening was announced by a Group officer, his name I cannot recall, who suddenly poked his head round the door of the dining-room and murmured, "We've got twenty dames outside, boys, what about it?"

Everyone took off. He had, too. He'd brought along the girls who were working in Group, the equivalent of W.A.A.F.'s.

I remember chatting to one dark-haired lass with the high cheekbones and composed manner of a Burmese. She said, not without pride, "Yes, I live here. I'm Anglo-Burmese." Which shook my equanimity momentarily because I had gathered, passing through India, that racial mixtures were not in favour. You ignored them like excretory processes; and if you were octoroon you swore blind you came from Blackpool.

She had a very sensible outlook, was quick to laugh and, like any other wench, enjoyed company. She told me, among other things, "One great fault has been that you (the British)—have kept to yourselves in Burma. Our families *are* educated, you know, and our people are happy, they like entertaining... that attitude of yours naturally creates resentment." Whether that is so I don't know, but there is her opinion. She also told me that the lower, no, that is an unkind word, the simple classes of Burmese loved a gamble. If a Burman was about to cut your throat, one way of stalling off the evil moment would be to produce a pack of cards.

Eventually the girls were shepherded away, the bad types gathered together to have several for the road, and, glancing in at the room as I myself wandered off to bed, I saw one slightly pixilated A.V.G. whirling a similarly tiddled R.A.F. pilot round in a burlesque of a rumba.

February 19th. Not being on at dawn, Allan and I had a more leisurely breakfast that morning. There were only two of us as it happened, and we slipped away in the jeep, knowing there was a morning show, feeling as if we were off on a day's stalking. Yet the day, for myself, ended on a grimmer kind of stalking!

We arrived at dispersal—the D.C. was already back at the Watch Office again, taking away more mothers and kids—and Tex Wisrodt was the first one I met. He had his mouth full of bread scrounged from one of the crew.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Hemingway," he grinned. "Would you care to join me in a dish of char?"

I joined him, and half an hour later, up at 20,000 ft. over Bilin, which the Blenheims were bombing, wished I hadn't. A fighter trip usually lasts not more than two hours, with which one's bladder can cope. However, I had swallowed the tea quickly, had immediately afterwards gone to my aircraft, and

now what with the cold wind at our height. I was feeling like a small boy towards the end of a tea-party.

However, apart from that discomfort, the trip was uneventful and despite our vigilant look-out there was no sign of any Jap formation. It is always a pleasure to have completed a show and be well on your way to the base, but we all were disappointed somewhat. As I followed yellow section in to land, I thought to myself, almost uneasily, that one day we'd go over there and suddenly the sky would become full of pirouetting little bastard Jap 97s! I took one last look round the horizon as I sank down towards the runway, half expecting to see the huddle of an enemy formation running in on a surprise strafe.

The A.L.O. awaited us, and we were able to tell him the Blenheims had been most accurate, it had been one of their best efforts. We asked him if there had been a lull in the ground fighting. He answered "No, the Japs are steadily moving up supplies and, in fact, making a particularly annoying series of thrusts against our outnumbered and hard-pressed troops at this time."

"Just as I thought then," the C.O. remarked, "for us it's the quiet before the whistle blows again after half-time. We haven't had any P.R.U. reports of aircraft at Moulmein yet though!" Not that that signified, as he added, for the Jap habit, as it still stands, is to move up their concentrations of bombers and fighters to an advanced base the evening before they intend taking action.

With that the A.L.O. said cheerio and drove off. He was a harassed man if ever there was one, for the difficulties of keeping check on army positions in that campaign, as always in that type of jungle warfare, were innumerable.

Several of us walked over to our machines and gave a hand to the armourers who were cleaning the guns and checking ammunition-belts. Casually laying my palm on the wing, I exclaimed, "Blast!" It was hot enough to fry an egg—and one afternoon some of the men did fry one on a wing, for a joke!

Lunch that day was the old friend, bully, with bread, some dates and currants, and the inevitable tea. After filling my stomach with an enormous mixture of solid and liquid, I relaxed and dozed, feeling somewhat listless with the heat. Being fair skinned and not tanning easily, I react to overmuch sun quickly.

The Burmese sun always compelled me to retire under shade after working for a couple of hours on the guns. Others, I remember, would be able to walk about all day long, even at two in the afternoon, without ill effect.

Through half-closed eyes I and Jack Gibson watched the boys go off on another escort. He nudged me, after the noise of the Merlins had ceased, and offered one of his American cigarettes.

"Hello . . . thanks . . . where'd you get these?"

"Off the A.W.G., got talkin' to the boys last night!"

We sat on in a comfortable, friendly silence, watching the fanciful shimmer of heat undulating rapidly just above the concrete runway. From the direction of the Burma Road came a slight hum of traffic. Occasionally, from where Mike and his slaves were toiling to keep our machines serviceable, there came a roar as an engine was run up. After the noise had quietened, long after, there would be a cloud of dust floating slowly downwind towards the A.V.G.

For no reason at all, the two of us started an inconclusive argument about the merits of American and British planes. On my part it developed into an interminable explanation of British military policy, transferred itself because of a wandering cur that aroused our ire to sentimental recollections of dogs we had owned, and inconsequentially passed to his learned disquisition on picnics with your girl friend in the southern states of U.S.A. and how to mix a gin sling for said picnic. His recipe for a gin sling would, if sipped all day, "Keep a nice edge on!"

The telephone shrilled urgently. I jumped up. My hands started to sweat slightly with excitement as I held the receiver. "Hello, yes?"

Ops.' voice was talking before I had the receiver to my ear: "...and we want one section to go over and strafe the road between Theton and Theinz, have you got that?"

I reached for a map and awkwardly opened it out. "Yes, yes, I've got it. What's doing there?"

"We've had report of a Jap convoy moving up, transport, mules, troops, everything; with luck you ought to be able to catch them!"

Jack was at my elbow. "Let's go, Gritty," he murmured urgently. "I know it, I know it, I flew over the very spot only the other day with the C.O."

"Who's that speaking?"

I hesitated momentarily. We were the only two left at that time. Could I take the responsibility of saying we would fulfil the job?

"P/O. Hemingway...that'll be O.K., myself and another section leader are here, we'll get cracking right away!" I slammed the receiver down before they had a chance to argue. I should explain that the boys had left on the afternoon show later than usual, some time after three, and it was now after five and they were still not back.

Yelling out through the back window space to the ground crews, Jack and I bounded, such was our bubbling excitement, to our machines. What a chance! The Japs had never been caught in the open before. As I scrambled into the cockpit, fumbled with straps and parachute harness, my brain was working fast but jerkily, trying to recall from all my training tips the possibilities and best methods of attack. Not that I didn't know, and I was confident Jack and I would work together instinctively—it was just sheer excitement.

There was approximately an hour and a half before sunset, which would suffice, half an hour there, half an hour on the job, and half an hour back. I was taxiing out before Jack, as his prop commenced turning, slowly at first, the sparks not catching, then a sudden blur of blades. Roaring off down the runway and relaxing from the business of operating my undercart lever to pull back the pitch to cruising revs., I soon swung round the drome. Jack was up, too, and with one brief call to Ops. on the R/T. we were away.

The dust of our departure dissolved over the runway. I caught a glimpse of an A.V.G. pilot looking up interestedly, then we were heading straight for the target area. Jack called out something to me once, but his transmitter wasn't so hot and I carried on. I noticed he was gradually diverging to the left, away from the compass bearing I was holding to. At the time, I thought mildly, "Blast him, I know I'm on the right course—where's he going!" After the trip I learned he was going by pin-points and, further, my compass was slightly out of true. At all events, both decided to carry on individually.

I swept across the water, keeping a wary eye above for any odd patrolling Jap, and as I roared in over the creeks and flat

land on the coast side of the road objective an occasional white bird—maybe gulls—flicked itself desperately away from my whirling blades. Ah, the road itself!

And not a sign of a Jap! I turned right, going down to within sight of the Martaban area, and my patrol was as fruitless. I glanced up at the white pagoda on top of the last knoll of the line of hills, and remember the malicious, silly thought of, "What about blasting the yellow priest jobs up?" Luckily, I decided not to waste ammunition and retraced my course. There was no sign of Jack, and it began to appear that the H.Q. panic concerned nothing more than a Scotch mist.

Then, flying north of my original point of contact with the road, I saw a car, obviously Army, suspiciously still. I wheeled over and something seemed to scurry underneath. Instantly I yanked back the stick, put on full throttle and swept round until I could get my sight on the bonnet. I gave it a long burst and saw the strikes all over the car. The bullets that missed, like the dragon's teeth, caused a myriad figures of dust to leap up.

I turned away, satisfied that the car and whoever was underneath had been pranged, and flew hard up the road. As I approached a section where there were trees scattered on the right and a thicker belt on the left, my eyes picked up a horse, riderless, panicking away from the road—and just a little way along was a scene of carnage that made me cry out aloud. "Gibby's been here!" There were horses, mules, dead and wounded Japs slumped on the road in all manner of grotesque attitudes, just as if they had been shovelled there by a giant spade.

But there were also others for me to attend to! As I appeared out of the now mild dazzle of the south-west the Japs must have been re-forming. I saw a number of them in their greeny-grey uniform scampering like mice for the cover of the trees. Squat bodies they appeared to have, and putteed bow-legs. It was a curious sensation to watch a man, in fear of death, scrambling along almost on hands and knees.

By the time I had wheeled on to them they were almost under cover, but I caught the last dozen and with my fire jerked them to the ground where they sagged still. I'd never killed a man like that before. Firing from a plane, one is quite detached somehow—until long after the event. I remember smelling the fumes

of cordite in the cockpit, catching sight in the corner of my eye of the flames of my guns, and frowning in that first half-second when I saw my initial firing was missing the running Japs. Then I was roaring over the trees, heaving back on the stick and jinking away. Farther up the road I killed off some more horses, at which I did hesitate momentarily although it was an illogical reaction in the circumstances. Then I swept round the right-angle bend in the road, where it ran through a small village.

Round that bend there were two or three vehicles pulled up, and beside one a Jap officer was calmly looking up at me. For a second we were within hailing distance, then I sank lower, trying to be cunning, and circled so as to come back at them. Just within range I pulled up, snapped the Hurricane on its side and aligned my sight on the vehicles. The Jap officer—he had guts—stayed where he was and only a miracle saved him. He must have been calling out orders to the troops hiding in the trees just beyond, for as I flashed overhead I heard a slight ping. Hmm, they must be firing at me, I reflected fatuously. How bloody silly, of course they were firing at me. . . Such is the way one's reactions speed through one's brain. So I turned, and approaching the road on the homeward run aimed at the belt of trees and gave them all my remaining ammunition. In the momentary view I had of the road as I flew over for the last time I saw the officer again—and his vehicles were now smoking!

Lordie, how rough my engine sounded as I passed over that all-too-familiar stretch of water! In my search I had wasted more time than I could afford and the sun was now a mere golden saucer chipped by the horizon. My machine and I plodded on. Over the right side of the Sittang I relaxed and opened the hood. I found I had sweated more than somewhat during that sortie. It wasn't until I was as near as damn it over Mingaladon that I thought of calling up and telling Ops. that I was O.K. and practically home. Then I suddenly heard the familiar voice break into my ears, "Hello, Bandit Green One, Hello, Bandit Green One, are you receiving?"

They were worried, I found out, as Jack had returned with empty ammunition pans and there had been not a word from me. It was then a little after seven. I switched over my R/T. and answered. It was rather nice to hear Ops.' voice brighten

in reply. He told me a flare path was laid as if for a night landing. As he spoke I could see Allan MacDougal, whom I knew was Duty Pilot that day, just leaving the runway after having set out the lamps. But I was so happy and tired I casually whipped down in a mild beat-up of the dispersal, slapped my wheels down, and landed on my own runway. Did Allan curse me!

Finally, back at dispersal with Jack, the two of us almost danced round each other. The first time we had caught the Japs on the ground! Oh, boy...Og, booooy! The I.O. had quite a job extracting a coherent story from us but was very patient, and then drove us back to the mess. In the car Jack explained how he had been able to go direct, like a homing pigeon, and had caught the Japs first.

I didn't bother to wash, and walked straight into the bar and had a pint.

My exhilaration was great, as if I had been drinking champagne in the open on a spring, sunny morning. The C.O. and the boys were smiling, too, for the whole squadron gained credit from the incident. As I promised, I slipped over to the adjacent sergeants' mess and had a drink with them, and there, incidentally, shot a terrific line to Flight Guest and Tug Wilson!

Then, returning to our own mess for a meal, the food sobered me. I slipped quietly to bed—and the reaction came. It was true enough what I had read, what the others had admitted, as I dozed off it was with the sombre but detached pity for those "poor little yellow bastards." I shall always remember the sight, as though I had taken a permanent photographic record, of the last straggler Jap running hunched and desperate for cover, as an ant will scramble away from an impending boot.

Allan must have found me sleeping heavily next morning, for when I woke he had gone. It was a nice gesture, and so I had breakfast and went down with Whitby, of the other squadron, in their jeep.

There was the same sun gathering heat from ever-replenished reserves to roast us, the sky without a cloud and the haze building up as all-pervading as the day previous. It was straightforward readiness that morning, and after checking my kit, helmet on gunsight, controls set for take-off, parachute on wing, I returned to the hut.

Incidentally, Tug Wilson, as I was fiddling in the cockpit, pointed out some fresh patches of fabric, the red dope standing out like a sore against the camouflage of the rest.

"They were getting nasty, sir!" he remarked significantly. "See you collected three pups!"

I hadn't known that. I found that one of the Japs had come near to wiping me out, the bullet in question having smacked from bottom to top through the fuselage at a slight angle, a few inches behind my armourplating. It must have been as I had swept over the trees, and it confirmed that that officer, standing courageously in the road, had directed their aim to create a "box" of fire. Jack, too, had collected some souvenirs of the sortie.

The morning passed slowly, although the sun seemed to reach an unrelenting, torrid effulgence long before lunch-time. We saw a sudden "red" soar up from the other squadron's dispersal and two of their machines went up after a supposed recce, but otherwise there was no action. An occasional visiting machine arrived, including, to Mike's relief, two new Hurricanes. If my memory is correct, I think they were piloted by Frank Earnshaw and Owen Reid, two more of our squadron.

Because it seemed particularly hot that morning, I remember thinking about the crews and how they were keeping at their job, which entailed conditions of great difficulty. First the sun made all metal too hot to touch—wings, petrol tank covers, etc., which had to be manipulated by the erks re-arming and refuelling. Secondly, they had to improvise many of their tool-kits, such odd items as airscrew kits, and they had to refuel only through chainois strainers to guard against the dust and the condensation that arises in side tanks or cans owing to the contrast between the heat of midday and coolness of midnight. Thirdly, most of the servicing jobs could not be done under cover. Machines had to stand in the sun, and the men had to work on them there, willy nilly. In general, they had to effect a sort of Robinson Crusoe improvisation.

It was good experience, granted, but annoying. Yet their morale was terrific. I had never seen them so cheerful before. They felt rewarded when we came back and said that we had pranged something. That was how I felt about them, and I'd like to meet them in a pub after this war and have a chat to see

if I was right (the Black Horse, Chorleywood Common, any Sunday morning!).

Mike, I remembered once saying, "It's no fault of the men we have machines U/S., it's *always* because we can't get the spares." Poor Mike, he was harried like an escaped convict.

Round about 11 we had another can of char, and the A.L.O. happened to arrive. He grinned craftily and asked, in all innocence, "Any tea to spare?"

His face was serious, however, as he parried out inquiries as to the situation. I have to this day felt sorry for him in his task. A retreat always produces recriminations; we could not understand the Army's position, and at the time the Japs did seem to be advancing invincibly. Nevertheless we got on with our A.L.O. Concerning our big moan, that he could never give us enough targets, we understood well enough that wasn't his fault, or the Army's. Their communications were constantly being cut and, as I have indicated, the Japs were extraordinarily clever at keeping out of sight by day.

I think it was he who told that the Governor and his staff were evacuating the two that day. His main comment was to the effect, however, that if the Sittang could be held—despite the Japs' increasing infiltrations—the Army would be able to consolidate with the reinforcements then diverted to and hurrying towards us. The area from the Sittang westwards, as I have seen from the air, was flat, mainly paddy, and offered our troops, unused to jungle warfare, the best chance.

At lunch-time I went with the C.O., Bush and Allan *via* the Burma Road, to the A.V.G.-cum-general mess at the opposite side of the aerodrome. We went inside the cool shade of the bamboo hut quietly, all thinking resignedly of the seeming inevitable prospect of going back. As we chewed a mess of sardines, canned herrings, bully, boiled eggs, and bread, the C.O. said, somewhat gloomily, "If we lose Rangoon it's going to be tough!"

As he has since confessed to me, he had more on his mind, worrying about his squadron, than at times he felt he could bear. But it was he who cheered us with the afterthought: "Still, what the hell, huh, if we go back and the Japs take Burma—as they will if they once get into Rangoon—we'll go back with the

A.V.G. and fight the Japs in China!" There's many a true word...

After that lunch I drove one jeep in order to refuel it at the service-pump standing a few hundred yards up the Burma Road. There was naturally an amount of military traffic. I noticed a line of trucks of an Indian regiment moving down. I think they were Punjabs. I waited in the queue, got my acrobatic vehicles refilled and then turned back. As I did so the others came out of the aerodrome road and nipped in front of me. At that moment the road was clear, and we were away like hounds running in excitement and pleasure.

"Crack! Mmm...wee!" Involuntarily I ducked, the jeep ahead swerved also, and Bush's stream of profanity flew back to my ear. That was the first time someone took a potshot at us, but not the last. The incident seemed to increase the general cussedness of things. I fingered my gun nervously, and drove all the faster. Back at dispersal, we talked about it angrily. Some of the boys wanted to have a man-hunt there and then, but the C.O. grimly told them to shut up.

Luckily there was another escort job to do in the afternoon, and that was good as a dose of salts. Up in the cool sky, at least doing something active towards the general effort, we felt, "Blast anybody, let the civvies go...good thing, now we can get down to business!" Consequently, when the day was over and it had become cool once more, we returned to the mess in cheerful good humour.

We walked in to an atmosphere of packing. This was what the C.O. had had on his mind. Sam told me we all had to put away our spare kit and he would take it with the convoy that was leaving to-morrow morning for Magwe by road. We nodded at each other, momentarily glum, and I went over and first of all pulled out my massive camp kit.

"I know it's a shame, Ken," Sam remarked, as much to himself as to me, "but it can't be helped. Group say we must have the bulk of the chaps out before it's too late, to avoid a shambles, and I think maybe they're right."

Heaving at some straps, I grunted back, "Hun—well, as long as we don't run out of beer and bully I shan't worry much." At which we both chuckled.

"Any gen?" I inquired a few moments later.

"What d'you mean, the Army?"

He paused, then continued, "Not really, Ken, except that the Japs are definitely infiltrating across the Sittang, and if they do that too much they've got us by the short hairs!"

He shook his case, trying to make just a little more room. "I pity the lads out there," in sober tones, "they've been having a rough time...not trained for this job!"

By this time I had packed my suitcase and the camp kit was ready, while I had left myself an empty parachute bag to hold a change of clothing, shaving tackle, and a few oddments. I sat on the edge of the bed and we both lit our pipes.

"Maybe it'll turn out O.K.," I mused aloud. "Maybe you'll get word half-way up there to return!"

Sam looked at me in mock sternness. "Don't you do that, my lad; it'll be a bad enough trip as it is without any mucking around coming back and then going on, then coming back, from day to day."

I laughed, and we stood up. "Listen, there's Mike and the Doc, let's have a beer...don't you know it's on the house!"

It was, too. Behind the bar stood Fuggy in all his glory. The mess accounts everyone declared, would have to go for a Burton, and Fuggy also interpolated, in high glee, how he had just walked into a house as the owners had been evacuating. "The chap said, 'Here, take that beer in my frig., I can't use it, you boys have it,' and so of course I did!" From that day onwards, we maintained our stocks from the same sources.

Although we knew, in our bones, the situation was such that evacuation for ourselves as well as the civilians was probable, the boys were in good fettle. We chatted and discussed tactics as interminably as ever—the hangar doors were never closed—and the only difference I noticed was that, by telepathic agreement, we all carried our guns every second of our waking day. It was not at all ridiculous; the Japs had, and knew how to use, airborne troops.

I was on dawn readiness again next morning and in view of having been fired at, we drove warily down to the drome, our guns free. The mist was thicker this morning, and we kept an extra jacket on until breakfast time. Our precautions were not unjustified, for Allan and I were fired at again as we were driving back for a quick meal.

The road by the mess was full of manoeuvring vehicles—the Adj. with his convoy—and outside the building a group of Indian bearers huddled with their womenfolk, pathetic, anxious, hopeful that their sahibs would see them to rights. We chuckled boisterously at the clamour, had a quick, scrappy meal from the corporal, the only one of the mess staff we retained, and then slipped back to the aerodrome.

During the morning's escort job, all of us flew with an expectancy arising out of the feeling that this quiet was about to burst—wide open! As we circled over the other side of the Sittang and watched some of our sections follow the bombers and go down to strafe, we strained our sphincters more than ever in the determination not to be jumped.

Life at the aerodrome carried on as usual. It was quiet between flights, maybe the atmosphere could have been termed brooding, but we ourselves joked and snoozed and drank as much char as ever before.

I remember the lunch that day very clearly. We had been binding for days in typical, bolshie-17 fashion about the food on the aerodrome, but that day the messing officer brought round to us a sackful of canned goods of all varieties. Inside the bamboo hut we all busied ourselves opening them.

Tex Wisrodt exclaimed to high heaven at the result of his labours. "Say . . . gee . . . look at this!" He held out a succulent ham, really one of the finest sights I've seen for many a day, or will see for years to come, I've no doubt.

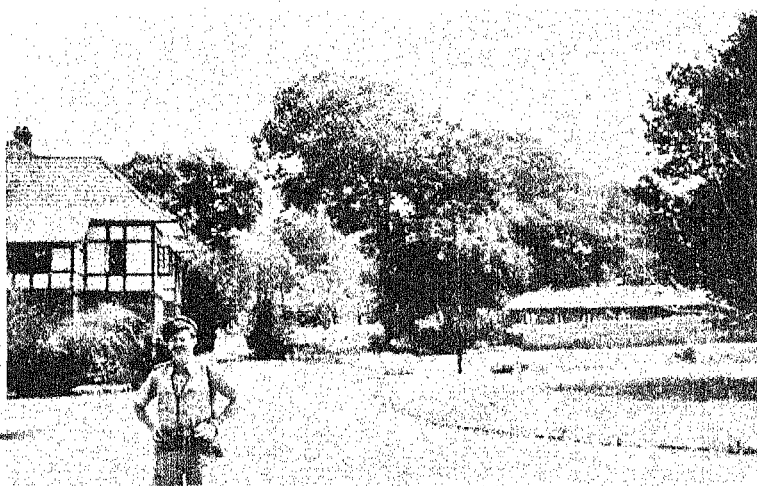
We hacked chunks off of it, ignoring all rules of carving, and had that with slices of salmon and cornflakes in place of bread. Ken Wheatley and Allan MacDou' opened up some apricots. Tug came in with a steaming bucket of tea, and we tucked into a meal fit for both gourmands and epicures.

In the middle of the snuffling and champing, Tex Barriek disgustedly criticised the other Tex. Wisrodt, a tall lad with a shock of dark hair and lean features, swallowed one huge mouthful of ham, popped in another mass of cornflakes and then retorted to the comment of, "Hell, man alive, you'll be ill eating so much haaan!" with the placid repartee, "I don't give a damn, I wanna be ill that way!"

As he drawled it out with his marked American accent Tug and Allan and I choked with laughter. Allan MacDou', too,



Swimming Pool at Maymo.



Strawberries and Cream ! Maymo Grounds and Flats.



Merklila Temple on the River.



Mandalay, the Glamorous.

covered everyone near him with a half-digested mass of corn-flakes. At which Ken Wheatley, his brother Canadian, exclaimed, "Manners, MacDou', show the English how to behave and keep your mouth shut, for Chris'ake!"

Eventually we sauntered out to the veranda and lay back, replete and happy, and the messing officer had included some packets of cigarettes in the sack. Tex Wisrodt sighed happily.

"I couldn't move now if the A.O.C. himself purrsernaaly told me to git to hell up there in th' sky!"

Content, none of us bothered to answer.

The telephone rang. I said, "No...I DON'T...BELIEVE..."

"Scramble, angels 15 over base...whippeec!" Jack Gibson, who had answered the call, came running out and tottered away to his plane. We jumped to it and lumbered clumsily after him. "Oh, Jees's," I panted to the erk as I grabbed at the straps he was holding for me in the cockpit. "Oh, Jees's, I couldn't run another yard!"

One roar, another, a third burble and backfire then another roar, and in a minute, less, we were all jockeying into position. There was so much dust I cannot think how we failed to have a taxying prang. I know as I edged forward through the whirling clouds in order to get along to the runway allocated to us, a Tomahawk loomed up, just off the deck, its wheels beginning to fold up. It missed me by a matter of feet, and I was forced to wait in case there were others following.

We got away well though, the C.O. leading us north at first to gain great height, then we came back. Ahead was a small bunch of our chaps, including Tex Barrick, who had been separated during take-off. We were heading south-west for a while, and there really seemed to be something doing. It was good to be together, and we paced forward eagerly as hounds, close as if we were actuated by some puppet master who with one clenched fist was pulling the strings of our destiny.

Then, to our great surprise, we heard the word "Snapper." That was Barrick's voice, I was sure. We all hesitated, but still the C.O. carried on. It came again, more urgently, "Snapper, snapper!" So we circled for a while, loath to lose our precious height and finally Ops. came through unmistakably ordering us to "Snapper."

What had happened was that Tex had spotted some Or's. In his excitement he had yelled out the code word the squadron used in England in an emergency when being jumped. It was a signal for us savagely to yank round and so avoid attackers. At Rangoon it was used to order us to return and land. We had to laugh when we sorted out the situation, and we were cheered the A.V.G. got five. Tex Barrick, our sole representative on that raid—merely a taunting sweep on the part of a dozen or so Jap fighters testing our defences—however kept our name out of the mire and got one.

He was almost weeping when he landed, but with rage and exasperation. "God damn it, I got right to them and yelled out to you...w—we w—w—would have been perfect, sitting there above them!"

Jack Gibson, his brother southerner, a slim, even-lipped and handsome man, chuckled and drawled, "Aw! right, honeybunch, don't take on so...but you gits us all balled up with your snappers, Tex."

"But if you slow-coaches had bin there we would all have got one. And—and instaid, I jest haid to break off—aww!"

We laughed until our bellies ached. Jack giggled, "Did ye have t'git out quick Tex? Were they knockin' yew about, son?" And he collapsed into a chair, laughing and helpless again.

Tex looked at him sourly. "It ain't funny, you goddamned mint julep!"

We were set off again, but it was several minutes before the C.O. could make his comment. Familiarly twisting his small black moustache between two fingers, he remarked as gravely as he could, "Never mind, Barrick, they're all a shower of bastards...you just go and write out your report now!" So Tex retired, and we quietened down.

But the mood continued. The C.O. and Bush, seized with a bloodthirsty and hilarious desire to shoot something, decided a "pie" would do as well as a Jap. There were always pariah dogs slinking up near dispersal, attracted by any human habitations and foraging for odd scraps. Many of them were obviously diseased, to look at them made me sick. My impression has been that Burma had twice as many four-legged, mangy wrecks than ever there are in India, though on the whole Burma has always

seemed to be much the cleaner country—perhaps because it is washed by a heavier monsoon!

Bush and the C.O. soon found suitable targets, and shortly afterwards we heard a bang, and another, then one dog that could hardly use its rear leg came padding by as quickly as it could get away.

"Don't do that! Gits on my nerves," remarked Ken Wheatley sleepily.

The Doc visited us, and after sitting with us while we all drank a cup of tea boldly offered to cut my hair. "Have it done now, Ken, by an expecairt; can't let you go around looking like one of those long-haired arrrrtists!"

Really needing a haircut, the urgency being such that my flying helmet was becoming a restriction, I sat down on a chair while Doc produced his scissors, borrowed a comb from someone else and set to.

"Short back and sides 'n' thinitout 'ton top!" I commanded.

"Yes, sirr!"

I became somewhat suspicious of the Doc's efforts when I seemed to hear a surreptitious giggling from behind my back. What Doc gave me was actually a very smart basin clip; from about ear-level I was mere stubble and above I was tufted. But what the hell! However, I refused to let him touch my beard which by then was rivalling the Golden Fleece.

The Doc being on the spot was fortunate, as it transpired. A truck drove up and from it we gently lifted a Blenheim observer, an Australian lad. His story made us admire his guts. Over the Doc's shoulder, as the latter examined his ankle, in which there was a bone broken, the observer told us of his adventures below Kyaikto behind the Jap lines, where the Blenheim had crash-landed. Whether it was due to engine failure or flak I don't recall now.

The pilot and gunner were killed, but he got out quickly and half crawled, half hopped, as far from the machine as possible. By great good fortune he fell in with some friendly Burmese, simple country folk who rested him by day and fed him on rice and vegetables. By night, hidden under hay on one of their bullock carts, they took him slowly through the lines to British-controlled territory. If he had been caught in the cart—sorry!—he could have made no last bid for freedom because of his

ankle. He remembered vividly jolting along, his limb aching intolerably, listening to the continuous wheezing creak of the wooden axles as the bullocks indefatigably plodded on. Eventually he was able to make contact with the Army, who got him a lift back to Rangoon.

"Boy, it's good to see you chaps again!" he exclaimed, many, many times.

He, nor any of us, particularly relished the idea of being caught by the Japs and casually bayoneted as a nuisance. We well knew, too, that the Nippons might subject a prisoner to indecent cruelties before despatching him. Yet, typically unpredictable, we had heard their officers protected most prisoners and ordered them to be passed back for proper interrogation.

After one more escort the afternoon concluded, there being no more scrambles, so at dusk two jeeploads of pilots raced each other home. I kept my hand on my revolver.

We all had a beer as soon as we arrived, the C.O. leading us in with the customary 17 password, "Have a snort, chaps?" Then I munched some sort of meal—our corporal did his best, but supplies were erratic—and went to bed. I was so tired, like Allan and everyone else in fact, that to relax supinely within my mosquito-net was an exquisite pleasure. I fell asleep at once, in boneless content, limp as a filleted fish.

CHAPTER IV

CONFUSION !

Now I have to break sequence to some extent, after the fashion of a film producer who more often than not first puts his camera-men on the climatical love scene and concludes his production by taking the opening panoramas. However, anything suggestive of a harrowing revelation is purely accidental. Enough mud has been spattered over our exit from Burma; my purpose is to tell of the courage and good humour of the pilots and crews of the squadron.

On the morning when Allan and I, slipping back to the mess for a quick breakfast, had encountered Sam and his convoy, I had stood and watched the road outside the mess as I smoked a

cigarette and waited for Allan to finish off his tea. The scattered groups of persons evacuating Rangoon I had noticed days before. That morning the stream had swollen, and the sudden flood had just the same muddied, hurried air. There were many Indian families, as often as not trudging by foot with a mere bundle of clothes and odd belongings, the woman holding a cooking-pot in her hand and carrying another filled with food on her head. Driving away were the middlemen, the wealthier shop-keepers, occasionally European wives and men whose firms had ordered them away. And I saw all manner of vehicles, from bullock carts to cycles, from Morris 10's to handsome, sleek Mercedes. Each car was crammed full of Father Christmas' sack of presents, and among the clutter the passengers reclined awkwardly, dismally, and fearfully.

From that day on, even until our last moments in Rangoon, that crocodile painfully dragged its way north with the timid persistence of despair. One Indian wife sank down on the grass verge nearby with every appearance of exhaustion—and they were intending to walk to Mandalay! Yet soon she was persuaded to her feet once more, and off the pitiful group trailed. The stream of people was incessant; as we went to bed we could hear them shuffling along, late at night—and next morning another hundred or so were straggling up the trail.

Before Allan and I returned to the aerodrome we tried to interrogate a group of bearers and their families, including one very old lady who was rocking slowly from side to side, a tear sometimes exuding from her rheumy eyes. We gathered they had been told "their sahibs" would look after them. I looked at Allan. "Sam's forgotten them, Allan. Where's the convoy now? It'll be by the crossroads near the drome by now, won't it?"

He looked doubtful. "Maybe. By rights Group convoy should have joined up and they should be off...Group'll probably be late though!"

We went off in the jeep and, sure enough, right along the slope of the road as it ran directly down to the aerodrome, there were the squadron vehicles. We stopped alongside Sam's car. His face glared at us, red, sweating.

"Well, you types, what's the trouble?"

We told him. He swore. "Damn and blast it, I said to

Warrant Officer Williams to fit them in somewhere...and," inconsequentially, "these Group wallahs haven't arrived yet. What a journey I'm going to have!"

He heaved himself out and we grinned at his bulky frame, seething with unaccustomed irritation, striding down to one of the trucks. The crews grinned at us. They didn't give a damn. What was one more move after coming all the way from England?

Sam came back with the Disciplinarian, who was talking rapidly. "No one ever told me, sir. Anyhow, we can soon send...who shall we send now...I know," he turned and yelled out. "Hawkins, nip back and pick up some wogs outside the officers' mess. Whole bloody lot, women and kids as well!"

Sam sighed. "Well, that's that."

Mr. Williams, a lad of medium height and rugged countenance, who had already proved his worth in the Norwegian episode, grinned. "Never a dull moment, sir?"

The two of us bade Sam *au revoir* and moved along to dispersal. I took one last look at Sam getting back into the driving seat. As we learned later at Magwe, that incident was for him only the start of his adventures.

By accident the following morning I had an opportunity of seeing what it was like in the town. Up till then I had always been at the aerodrome, and the idea of time off for shopping simply had not occurred to me. Indeed, our movements were mostly severely practical; we went foraging for stray vehicles in abandoned car parks, for more beer, for possible spares. Thus, I and many of the boys never saw the famed Silver Grill, including its bullet-holed ceiling, the result of an argument between two A.V.G. pilots as to their shooting ability.

Having slept so well, I missed the morning jeep-run, and when I arrived at dispersal all Hurricane seats were filled—and not a chance of a vacancy either, as Brownie maliciously informed me! During the chatter Allan, who was also not on readiness, spoke to Bush about us trying to get hold of a few things before Rangoon closed right up. Food was an item at all times, for example.

"All right then," Allan finally exclaimed, "I'll take the Chev. and run Ken and some of the boys—who's spare?—into town." And off we went, as the others took to the air on an escort.

"Place is beginning to look lonely now," I shouted at Allan

as the air stilled and the machines dwindled to mere asterisks in the sky.

One of the sergeants leaned forward and remarked on the Governor having left the previous day. Allan turned his head and chipped in, "Yes, understand they've let loose all the convicts and lunatics."

I nodded. "Believe it's true enough. They've got to, I suppose, otherwise nobody'll feed 'em!"

The quiet and loneliness, which around the aerodrome had really become marked as the Sunday morning desolation of Threadneedle Street, decreased as we headed down a long well-built highway, past the golden pagoda, into the town. There, at least some Burmese civilians, with their neat black umbrellas and invariable cheroots, were strolling along. Allan let the jeep careen dangerously as he demonstrated what we would be encountering.

"You'll wake up and see a face," he contorted his mouth and cheeks and crossed his eyes, simultaneously twitching his hand violently, "looking round at you from the veranda. Then——"

"You keep on the road, please!" I said sternly.

"Then," he repeated, "you'll know the gremlins have got you!"

We chuckled; but sobered up soon enough. For all the number of people, some shopkeepers and other poorer looking Burmese who obviously couldn't afford to evacuate—or, probably, didn't care—there was no mistaking the atmosphere in Rangoon. Most shops were well boarded. Here and there were broken windows with materials, bits of metal, rags, shoes, strewn in front, while the passage-ways were unwashed, like a scullery left unattended overnight. The people we encountered stared at us curiously; moreover, it was not entirely comfortable. I was glad I had my gun.

I went into one shop and I remember holding myself arrogantly. We were few in number, you could imagine them behind your back whispering, whispering... The shopkeepers, some taciturnly, others more often than not in weary but not unkind indifference, failed to produce what Allan and I wanted. We got back into the jeep, settled together in a comforting compact body, like gunmen taking the air, and drove out of town back to the aerodrome.

Rangoon then, I remember thinking to myself, was a sight I'd only see once in a lifetime. We were compact a body of fighting-men as ever, as cheerfully ready for any job, but you could not ignore the atmosphere around entirely. Left there were about twelve Hurricanes, our squadron, and the A.V.G. We had to be content with twenty men for servicing and the A.V.G. had about a like number, I believe. The departure of the Governor seemed to produce outside the same effect as the afternoon sun slipping behind a sliver of nimbo-stratus—it is still warm, but not so warm!

Rumours were quick uprising as bamboo shoots. There was a Jap officer in the town inflaming the Burmese poor to riot. Some Indian troops had been knifed in the dark as they stood guarding the docks. There were two Jap aircraft carriers at the Andamans, about to move up and devastate our puny air force. And so on... If the guards of the Burmese regiment standing to around the aerodrome seemed, to our fancy, to be hostile, we laughed it off as early-morning gremlinitis and had our revolvers cleaned anew!

I wonder at it now. Blithe as a band of robbers, wary as a bunch of monkeys, the boys carried on—dawn readiness, an escort, perhaps a scramble, then a scrap lunch from the available tins, another escort or strafe, then back to the mess, to get enough sleep to carry us on till dawn again... And all the time, as the C.O. has since succinctly told me, "We hadn't got a clue, old Ken, the Japs might have been in Calcutta for all we knew—or cared!"

He had a tremendous worry all the while, every second of the day and every moment of dreaming leering round his shoulder, but the kind of typical incident about us he remembers as helping him to keep sane and calm was the following: "I happened to mention to Bush within hearing of some of the sergeants that we were short of transport.

"And what follows?" he chuckled. "Some of my thugs take me too seriously and first Sergeant Wisrodt affably comes bouncing round the dispersal with a six-wheel lorry asking, 'Will this do, sir?', then in the evening Bush disappears and returns with four jeeps, while Michael blandly caps the lot by remarking that his corporal had luckily found—'found', I ask you, Ken—six unwanted trucks!" Not that our old

sweat's instinct of scrounging proved valueless, as events turned out!

Back at dispersal, there being no machine available, I wandered about and happened to fall into conversation with Tug Wilson who mentioned there was a damaged Jap 97 in one of our hangars. I promptly suggested we inspect it as I had not examined one close to before then. Casually he agreed, adding with beatific innocence: "People in that big private house over the way have cleared out, might be something we could use there, shall we have a look on the return, sir?"

So we borrowed a jeep and drove along the road at the side of the aerodrome, and then up the short byway to the distant hangar.

You perhaps know that the Jap 97, an army fighter, is a small monoplane of the low-wing type, with a fixed undercarriage—and out of date now, of course. Its characteristics in the air are great manoeuvrability and a good rate of climb up to 15,000 ft. As I've already indicated, we respected them, and the Jap pilots we'd met so far flew them confidently.

The example I saw before me, of course, had wing tips smashed in, there were the holes of our bullets in its fuselage and its prop was curled like a shrivelling leaf. Outside, its finish was beautifully smooth. I looked inside the cockpit. Although light, its construction was sound. The instrument panel was makeshift, though, and some of the panelling of the body seemed to be a ply of a very thin metal and a wool fabric, compressed together.

Tug and I discussed its points and then, after vainly trying to prise off a piece of broken metal from the American-type radial engine, we left and investigated the house.

This was a large, many-roomed dwelling of spacious ceilings and luxurious furniture. The walls outside presented the half-brick, timbered facade of a twentieth-century "Tudor" style dwelling-place, plus some odd decorative touches indigenous to Burma. Inside there was cutlery, glass, clothes, utensils—I would not have been surprised if at any moment as we gazed around a servant had appeared, just as though the owner was merely not yet back from his office. The thought of the conditions which had made him, and presumably his family, walk out so abruptly, hushed our voices.

I remarked slowly to Tug, "See if there's any food, but otherwise leave it!" It would have been somehow ghoulisn to pillage the place.

Back at dispersal, I was surprised and disgruntled to be told that I and Brownie were to proceed to Magwe in the D.C. that afternoon. The object of the trip was for myself to expedite the despatch of some more Hurricanes down to Rangoon for the squadron, and to gather together such of the squadron pilots as had got as far as Magwe from India. I remember protesting to the C.O., but it was no use. I felt ill-treated and browned off.

"Stop mumbling in your beard about it, Ken, you bolshie bastard," the C.O. said kindly. "By keeping your finger out you can help me a lot, and as soon as you get a fresh machine yourself you can return!"

He indicated, as a consolation, that Sam would obviously be arriving at Magwe almost as soon as I would get there and could handle our interests at Magwe. So Brownie and I rushed off to the mess for a quick lunch, gathered together some of our belongings and returned to the Watch Office.

The D.C. was already there. We made ourselves known to the pilot, but five minutes later we were back at dispersal, grinning hugely.

"Sorry, sir," I reported, "the D.C.'s full up, we couldn't get aboard."

"Blast you," the C.O. grinned, and got on the telephone and arranged for us to go up in a Blenheim that was returning to Magwe also. Crestfallen, we returned to the Watch Office and awaited it, the while we looked at the boys taking off on an escort. Some intangible emotion of fealty made us bitter about leaving them; we wanted to muck in with our mob, and we felt almost guilty going back so far from the lunatics and snipers and refugees.

A cheerful Blenheim pilot cut short our self-pitying, and very shortly we were climbing into the bomber inside lying on a mass of clothes and packages. I could see through the perspex of the escape hatch the ground below—a funny sensation when taking off and landing, rather like being in a car with no floorboards—but it was a cramped position, so I went to sleep. Once I did glance down and by chance caught a full view of a large statue of Buddha and a worshipper walking slipperless up the steps.

I awoke later with Browne's feet on my chest, and to the click and faint jolt as the undercarriage was lowered and the gentle hum of half-throttled engines as we turned in towards Magwe's dusty, brick-red runway.

We helped the bomber boys pull out their paraphernalia, and then all of us jogged along the road to the town. Trains of bullock-carts creaking away, their drivers asleep on the load, were bestirring the ankle-deep, powdered-cream dust at the side of the metalled highway. The sun was setting over the Arakan Yoma like a glowing toffee-apple, and from the teak houses on stilts past which we trundled there came the smell of rice and curry. We ran over an unwary pie dog, crippled by disease and better dead, which was instantly covered with a pall of dust from our trail. Round the grass square in the centre of the village, what with the trees and neighbouring houses peeping shyly from among them, it was more like a village cricket green. Finally we came to the bomber squadron's billet, at which we spent the night.

The atmosphere of all the service establishments there, what with odd remnants of squadrons, was that of the day of arrival of a new fortnight's lodgers at a seaside boarding-house. They were settling in, there was confusion, muddling, scrap meals, and high good humour. All over the floor of the billet into which I walked there was straw, the wrappings of a large number of bottles of beer. I met Flight Lieutenant Beeston, the pilot who had navigated me to Rangoon, sitting on the edge of a charpoy. He took his mouth from a bottle, grinned, and waved hospitably, "Hello, boy, have a beer!"

I did, and a long chat too. He had brought his machine back because it was just about dropping to bits. He scrounged me a charpoy and a bite of food and with that, tired out, I went to sleep on one blanket. On the next bed was a squadron pet, their C.O.'s dachshund.

Earlyish next morning I slipped into my dusty, sweated shirt and shorts and walked over to the officers' mess. Magwe is only about half a mile from the Irrawaddy, and from the mess, the house of the District Magistrate, there was a pleasant view through a screen of trees of the river bank and smooth waters. Keeping in the shade and off the road because of the dust of passing vehicles, I went slowly along. Inside the mess itself there were so many of us we waited in spontaneously-organised

shifts. And there were those damned ducks' eggs again! I swallowed four mugs of tea.

Then to duty. First I called at S.H.Q. and was interviewed by W/Cdr. Woodhouse, D.F.C., who was in charge of the fighters, such few as were there. He shocked me by proposing to attach me to 67 Squadron, who had been relieved at Rangoon, having fought tenaciously there and at Singapore with their Buffaloes. Maybe he will remember how I politely "flannelled" his intention and established the necessity of myself and Brownie delivering fresh Hurricanes to Mingaladon. He, as it later happened, led some of the boys and myself on one or two show-downs from Prome, but at the time the thought of staying at Magwe with 67 and abandoning my friends seemed the height of disloyalty.

However, having gained my point, I hurriedly left that building and its turmoil. I immediately encountered Allan MacDou', who had just arrived with a further urgent message from the C.O. "We've got to do something. Mr. Hemingway, the machines won't last much longer!"

He was about to report also, but I grabbed his arm. "Come on, MacDou', don't you poke your nose into that building or you've had it!"

As we sauntered back into the square I told him, "We must keep our eyes skinned for fresh Hurricanes, and then I'll put in a strong plea for 'em and we'll nip back to Mingaladon."

"O.K." he grinned resignedly, "but wha' do we do now?"

"Well, they're expecting machines every day, I think, but they've had none to-day yet, so let's wander into the town. I want to get a thermos flask, for one thing, I get so damned dry in this country."

And off we went, two uncouth figures, myself bearded, both of us swinging a gun at our hips like a couple of cowboys come to town. We investigated the goods on sale in the local bazaar. Outside, Burmese or Indian shops do not look at all promising. The buildings were tumbledown, often a mess of corrugated iron and mud walls, and everything was displayed like the contents of a nail and oddments box, tipped out for rummaging. Only a draper's had any kind of orderly presentation. However, I found a thermos flask—Japanese made—and a red silk scarf, spotted white, took my fancy for flying. Allan MacDou'

ginned as I tried it round my neck. "Matches your beard, Gritty!"

We walked slowly back, unable to avoid the broiling sun. The villagers looked at us curiously from their dark slant eyes, and it was impossible to tell what their sentiments were. We soon shrugged off any query, for what with the heat and constant dust beaten up by the military vehicles, by the time we had returned to the mess for lunch I was more than ready to slake that incessant thirst again.

"Hello Ken . . . Ken, you old bastard!"

Myself and everyone around looked up at the shouted exclamations. There were Sam and Mike, grinning hugely. I rushed to them with delight. It was like meeting your brother in an unexpected place. But I could see they were tired, so we rudely grabbed a table and sat down together. I saw to it that they, and myself, got mugs of tea, and then I answered their surprised question at my being in Magwe.

Explaining, I finally warned Mike, "And they'll pinch you as station engineer officer, I bet. They wanted to stick me into the other squadron!"

"Well, I don't mind," Mike answered, "it'll keep me busy, and I'll have our crews together until the C.O.'s party eventually come up here."

"Not to-day, though," said Sam firmly, his bushy grey eyebrows frowning. "To-day we just get billets for the men and settle ourselves in—no more, no less!"

So after lunch I was driven along with them in comfort, and after Sam had implacably argued with H.Q. we settled the men in new bamboo huts off the aerodrome, while we ourselves got together in a similar building on the east side of the village green. We also segregated the squadron vehicles as the pioneers in America would have prepared for a Red Indian attack, to enable us to guard our personal kit and Mike's precious tools. The locals were not above looting; further, if the other squadron's "Chiefy" was worth his salt he'd be ruthlessly on the scrounge.

Before we returned to our own billet, Mike drove me to the dispersal at the aerodrome. It was nothing but a tent shading two or three broken-down charpoys and a couple of decrepit cupboards. There was an heterogeneous group of pilots hanging

around, not quite knowing why, who were on readiness with a few Hurricanes. Wrecks the latter appeared, too, as Mike commented. I mentioned my original intention to Mike and he agreed that, as soon as any repairable machine became serviceable, if a new one arrived, he and his men would vet it for me and I and Brownie and MacDon' would slip back to the boys.

This evening before dinner I decided I ought to wash, and I also trimmed my beard, to the accompaniment of jeers from Mike and "Titus," our defence officer. Then, we were sitting over our last mug of tea, listening to the wireless in the mess, from which we heard news of the Russian advance towards Poland, when by word of mouth came news of a parade on the village green at 9 o'clock.

"What the hell?"

Sam cursed and drove off to let the men know. When we arrived on the square we were sorted out into units. It was a grand check of personnel, and a "Higher Up" pep talked us concerning the need to be alert and to be prepared to fight as Churchill declared, "...in the streets...on the beaches!"

Our consequent rather grim mood was broken, however, by Sam leading us back to the billet and slyly producing from his kit a precious bottle of Scotch. We drank to the boys in Mingaladon and yarned and argued—principally, I think, about America's then critical opinion of our war effort—until we yawningly felt ready for "pounding the charpoy."

When I did think about it, and being away from Mingaladon gave my mind the chance, on the surface of our position in the Middle East and out in Burma, plus what we culled of the confusion in the East Indian islands, was somehow disappointing. Sam's clear brain, however, inspired by an indomitable love of country and fellow-countrymen, pointed out the logical reply, "Think, chaps, we're in effect fighting on three major fronts, at home, in the Middle East, and out here. The fact that we're falling back here is because we're only just ready to take on the first two fronts—and the Yanks, like us in '39, have only got enough to cope with their show in the Pacific. Anyhow, we're not doing badly for an island of forty odd millions—this year'll be a gloomy one, but '43 will see us on the upgrade!"

How right that man was—a very decent patriotism!

From within, we tucked up our mosquito-nets. Outside,

permeable as the distant clangour of a city viewed from on high, was a silence occasionally broken by the howling, snarling pie dog. Its tongue jarred the tranquillity as a rowdy can disturb the hush of a play's rapt audience. I murmured through my netting, "Have any excitement on the road, Sam?"

He grunted, then I heard him chuckling.

"What are you laughing at?"

Turning over, he mumbled, "Never Warrant Officer Williams' face dishing out food rations. He cussed and swore and bluffed the men into good humour like one of the best. And that confounded Group type—I could have smacked him down...eeh, lade he was like a blessed wasp buzzing round. But we kept together, slept in the open, washed in the river..." His voice died away. We all dozed off.

For some reason everyone of us woke early and that next day, from dawn till dusk, there seemed to be a bustling, pinpricking spirit abroad. I clopped in my slippers over the bare wood floor to the veranda outside and joined Sam and Michael in a wash. At half-seven it was delightful, neither cold nor sweaty, but it was too warm by the time we had had breakfast and I arrived at the dispersal tent in a cloud of dust and feeling sticky. Some of our men, stripped to the waist, were already working on an odd Hurricane parked on the sandy ground. As far as I could see, that morning all the Blenheims and D.C.'s were being used to get surplus ground crew over to Akyab. It was a sort of stripping for action. Owing to the confusion there was some odd scrounging of kit taking place, and I reminded myself to ask Sam to look after my luggage.

Conversation with Michael, already haring hither and thither in a cream-coloured truck and slightly appalled at the demands he was expected to fulfil on meagre resources, brought the glad news that there might be a Hurricane ready by lunch-time for me to fly down to Mingaladon. I hopped in alongside him and he took me to the one he had in mind. It was standing sizzling with heat, there were long streaks of oil from the under-carriage fairings, and the fabric was coated with dirt and dust like sandpaper.

"It'll fly O.K., Ken," Mike said. "We've just got to pinch a new oxygen regulator and give it a check run-up, that's all." Turning aside as a jeep bounced by, "Hey, Tug...Flight

Wilsooon!" Tug turned sharply and drew up. "Has the instrument basher got that regulator yet?"

Tug grinned. "I don't suppose so...I'll g—go and k—kick his arse for you, sir!"

There would be another kite, too, so Brownie and I arranged to fly down together, serviceability permitting. It remained now for me to heard S.H.Q. and be very persuasive. I left Michael and caded a lift back to town as far as the green. From there it was only a few yards, albeit dusty ones, to S.H.Q.

When I told Wing Commander Woodhouse what I could arrange he agreed straightaway. It was, of course, obvious that some of the machines would have to be sent down to Mingaladon to replace those there, which would inevitably become operationally useless as there were only twenty men for servicing.

So once more Brownie and I packed up our odd belongings, tucked away notes from Sam and Mike to the boys below, and then hung impatiently round at the tent on the drome until Mike could give us the O.K. We finally got away at tea-time and found the haze thick and pregnant with heat.

We climbed steadily until we got above it at about 10,000 ft., where the air was cool and clear, and pin-pointed our way down the Irrawaddy—Promé, Zaigon, a certain patch of forest in a perfect square, then along the road leading down to Mingaladon.

We were glad to see the glitter of the pagoda again and looked at the town closely while we dived down smoothly into the circuit round the aerodrome. I fancied that the town now had a look of abandon, of dishevelment like a bedroom after night. We chopped throttles and purred down the runway.

It did look rather more deserted to some extent, but no, there were one or two distant figures at dispersal watching our arrival with interest, and soon the two of us were grinning and chuckling away once more with the C.O. and Bush and Allan and Tommy, the two Texes, and Ken Wheatley and the crowd. It cheered the ground crews to see us return too. I felt like a dog with a new bone as I sat on the veranda, the usual mug of char in my hand.

There remained only time to disperse aircraft, and then the soothing crepuscular light bade us jog along back to the mess in the jeep. The mess bar was wide open and the news I gathered that night was good.



What a time—the Author



“Ruky” Chadwick and “Slim” Lewis and Slim’s Prang. Is Slim browned off!



One of the bands up to Maymo



Pagoda Maymo

There was an armoured division being landed, and it was to be rushed to hold Sittang. After that certainty had been established there were more supplies, reinforcements, for everyone on the way. Concerning which the C.O., with his usual causticity, remarked, "Not that any new machines will reach us—but it's a nice thought...cheers!"

Bush, on hearing that it was an Australian division, I think I remember him saying, "Well, of course that settles it. Now when they come down here to relieve us and take over for the advance——"

"We'll all go home!" somebody finished for him laughingly.

Despite our joking depreciation, we also were undoubtedly pleased immensely that the Army, fighting desperately, had taken the measure of the Jap on the other side of the river and had driven them back a few miles to Kyaikto. Someone added that the boats which had left Rangoon were returning because of the Higher Ups' changed optimistic view of the situation, but most of us commented in our minds that that was most likely a fanciful rumour.

The news from our point of view, though, was that the Jap air force was reviving its activities. The day before, which I had whiled away shopping in Magwe bazaar, the boys had had news of the arrival of aircraft on Moulmein aerodrome, and had promptly taken off to "scw 'em up like a dog's dinner."

It had been an exciting sortie. As they arrived over Moulmein the little Jap 97s were buzzing up into the air in furious anger, and there had developed a free-for-all with the local ack-ack indomitably blazing away at friend and foe. Bush had smacked one down in flames as it became airborne, while W/Cdr. Carey had modestly declared, "I saw one fly right across my sights and I took a full deflection shot on the offchance—and it came off!" He also got another. The C.O., too, had a very happy time, and accounted for one. The other squadron and the A.V.G. joined in as well, and the final result had been excellent.

I went in to dinner and found the meals now very well organised, owing to our own indefatigable corporal. As we ate, Allan related incidents of the raid, but he concluded with the news that Watty and Clop, both of whom had been on the same boat as ourselves and the former of whom had accompanied me from

Calcutta downwards, had bought it. I had become acquainted with Watty personally, and I was sorry to understand that his dour character was now vanquished.

But one soon forgets! Our faces quieten at such news, we mutter indistinguishably sometimes when it is someone in our own squadron, yet to imagine that pilots moon about afterwards with grim faces, and when they next go into action snarlingly press the gun-button with a "And that's for George!" is plain tripe. We are at war, our instinct is to push such incidents away in the subconscious and to get on with the job. It affects us only when we are growing "operationally tired" or when the man killed has been such a key personality in the squadron that his extinction is comparable to losing an elder brother or young sister. Besides, the pinch of salt to every stew of grief is the selfish thought it might be yourself next! Naturally we refuse to brood over that, or else you've had it, sure as sucking eggs!

I tucked myself away early, in preparation for dawn readiness. My sleepy reflections dwelt on the yellow-robed priests, of which it had been commented they seemed of late stealthily to be appearing in increasing numbers. I had been told that they were often criminals enjoying the sanctuary of the secular vocation. They certainly looked like it, with the bright ochre of their clothing, their shaven heads and black impassive eyes. I dreamt I was chased by one in a jeep!

CHAPTER V

BACK TO BUSINESS

Now, with the cool, pure morning mists mingled the besmirching oil smoke arising from dock fires. The main column was ever present, like the forewarnings of an eruption, and thinned out above into an anvil-shape at the great height of 16,000 ft. Not that we didn't go as cheerfully as ever to the aerodrome, Allan making the rumour of snipers an excuse for driving hell for leather. That morning in particular, he and Bush, imbued with a sort of bandit's devil-may-care, twisted round this bend and that in competition so that from above we must have looked like two intoxicated ants coming home with the milk.

There was action, too, not long after the mists had cleared and after we had chewed some odd scraps of breakfast. The A.L.O. arrived and almost immediately we were thronging round his clutter of maps. He had a promising target indeed, a report of some Japanese shipping, maybe troop-carrying, heading up from the Martaban area obviously with the intention of making a shore-landing behind our lines.

An excited chatter arose, which stilled as the C.O. looked up. Who would be going? I was lucky, and it turned out to be the C.O., Bush, myself, Ken Wheatley, Jack Gibson, and Tex Barrick making up the Flight. We listened to final instructions as to formation from the C.O., and then walked over to our machines and strapped ourselves in.

As I taxied out with the others through the inevitable "devils" of dust thrown up by our props, I wriggled about in the cockpit so as to bed down, as 'twere, my Mae West. Then we were off, taking one grinning glance at the small group of pilots of the other squadron who stood watching us. We formed up into three pairs, the pairs themselves positioning so as to constitute a broad vic., and we were stepped up and down with the top pair farthest from the sun. Thus we guarded against being jumped, each pair watching the opposite pair's tail and the C.O. covering the sky ahead.

It's only at nought feet, as we say, that in flying there is a sensation of speed—motion to a passenger upstairs in a bus is moderate compared with the impression derived when he stands on the step only a foot above ground. So, flying about 1,000 feet, I myself was impressed by being in the midst of an action comparable to a bayonet-charge. It was a gratifying mixture of excitement and lawlessness; we were going to nip over and create a short hell and be away with a roar and a yell—just as the raiding N.W. Frontier tribesmen descend from the hills.

The C.O. set a compass course, and we went straight as if we were following the Great North Road. As quickly we came over their heads and were gone, coolies working in the fields below lifted their fantastic hats and stared; cattle kicked their hind legs, lashed their tails and stampeded; birds in our path appearing like the snowball flung at you and perceived in a quick reconnoitring glance back, flapped in ungainly desperation and by luck missed our wings. And occasionally the smaller ones

would mangle themselves on the prop and there would come a spatter of blood on the front glass.

I wriggled in my seat as we swept out to sea. In five, ten minutes we were scouring the Bay of Martaban, and at first we were disappointed for there seemed to be nothing; its surface was glassy, shimmering, vacant. We swung round opposite Moulmein after going south, and then it was we found the ships. They were heading desperately for the shore north-east, and I think they must have turned off their original course on hearing from far away the unmistakable hum of the Merlius. I'm afraid they'd had it!

When we were almost in firing distance and were positioned to strafe in due order, they were revealed as two medium-size vessels, none the less larger than normal for the area, one crammed with troops and the other, with covered hatches, evidently a supply ship or ammunition carrier.

I twisted my gun-button to "Fire," and then it was my turn to heel over, steady myself, and get the bead on the ships. I selected the supply ship, and saw the flashes of my incendiaries dancing on the decks like rebounding molten raindrops. What with the firing it had already received, simultaneously with my burst, the ship flamed up abruptly as a gas-ring lights up, and clouds of smoke oozed and pulsed from the hatches and sides. Clearing the vessel by a few feet, I felt my aircraft hump through the bubbles of heat blown up from the burning decks.

Maybe I looked rather fiendish that moment. Certainly I remember feeling ruthlessly happy—quite an atavistic orgy!

I followed the others in swinging round for a second run, and we had trained so our timing was good; there was hardly a second's delay between the sixth's pilot's first burst and the C.O.'s second strafe. I had to jink slightly with rudder to waste time, Ken Wheatley being a couple of seconds late sweeping down in front—or I was too early. I had my eye on a mass of Japs struggling impotently in the water alongside the other vessel.

I damn nearly shot Ken Wheatley's tail off! I know his plane suddenly hopped along in the air like a man who has just sat on a drawing-pin.

"Christ!" I muttered behind my oxygen mask—and pulled up smartly to prevent myself from going into the sea. We circled

round once more, then, at a word from the C.O., we sped away as quickly as we had come.

It is a sobering thought that in a plane one has the power of the reaper to appear here, there, in a trice, to scythe a human stalk that a second before had been upright and secure in the sun among its fellows. But that is the thought one discusses after twilight, during the reverie preceding sleep.

As we fled from the depredation we were exultant as rogues who'd spruced a police inspector himself. My only worry all that time was my engine falling over the sea. I always knew vaguely that sharks inhabited tropic waters, and I could never convince myself that plopping down would not be the signal for a mob of razor-toothed fiends to tear my body apart. Not that we had encountered any return fire from the boats; our strafing had been well-timed and continuous. In any case, after the first blast their rifles were useless—the Japs were then in the water!

We came over Mingaladon again, beat up the dispersal in triumph, and then one after another rolled down the runway. As the last man reached the end of the strip, the C.O. led the gaggle of contented Hurricanes along to dispersal. We told the A.I.O., the other boys, everybody who came near, all about it, and drank immense mugs of tea—and more tea!

Eventually the chatter died down. I myself had just closed my eyes preparing for a doze, when we were galvanised into grumbling action by the cry of "Scramble!"

Oh, that cursed run to a kite. It is never a hundred yards, nothing like it, but although I used to be a sprinter at school, I have never been able to eliminate that gasping excitement as I clamber on the Hurricane and let myself flop down into the cockpit on to my parachute.

There was the usual cursing of traffic regulations as ourselves, the A.V.G., and the other squadron jockeyed for first off. The order was actually laid down, but time was more than money; thirty seconds meant an extra 500-800 ft. However, after climbing with mad energy—at one stage the bunch of Tomahawks curved past us, but we continued our respective paths as taciturnly as conflicting streams of clerks going to work in the morning—and stooging over along Rangoon with watchful eyes kept painfully directed into the treacherous area of sun and dazzle, Ops. recalled the lot of us.

We learned from Ops. later that Jap fighters had been around. They had made one dash over Mingaladon, but why they had not come down on us as we climbed we couldn't understand; they must have had the opportunity. The sky is larger than infinity, though, when you are looking for hostile planes, and they might easily have missed us in their repayment of our morning's card.

For a period we chatted and sat alert, thinking there might be more to follow, but as the telephone kept quiet and the sun wilted our anticipation, we turned to the important question of lunch. At the time I thought it was very nice—lots of oily sardines, bread, then prunes, then more bread and jam. In peacetime probably disrupting as brimstone treacle, but then our stomachs had a soldierly fortitude.

I had my mouth full of prunes, a spoonful taken from a communal tin—there were no plates for second course—when Ken Wheatley suddenly bethought himself of the Hurricane whose gunports he had noticed blazing away at him that morning.

"Say, Mr. Hemingway," he drawled in a mock sing-song voice, "was it you who nearly burned my arse off this morning?"

I spluttered and dropped a prune on the floor. "Umm... yes. I am sorry, really, but you didn't get out of the way——"

"——as quickly as you thought I would!" he finished off for me in disapproving tones. "O.K., I'll remember next time!"

"I'm really awfully sorry," I began earnestly, but Tex Wisrodt butted in, his mouth full, of course.

"Aw nuts, who gives a damn about that lop-eared Canuck. . . You go right ahead, Mr. Hemingway, bump him off next time—we'll give you protection!"

"So it's war, is it?" Ken snarled at Wisrodt.

"Yeah, it's war!"

"O. K.!"

"Well, O.K. then!" They then solemnly tossed for the last sardine.

We settled down to complete placidity again, and as my beard was now of delightful golden scruffiness, I consented to have it photographed. Everyone got the urge, and soon there we were, upside down...no, sorry, standing on machines, by

machines, in picturesque attitudes under machines, in machines, all taking the most terrific line-shooting photographs.

Someone murmured about the Kokine swimming-pool being handy, and the C.O. decided that the spare pilots might just as well take a jeep and get a dip while they could. Allan eventually drove off, with Bush, Tommy, Tex B., and Ken Wheatley.

We idly speculated as to whether the pool would still be fit to swim in? "Don't see why not," was one shrewd comment, "the electric light and water continue in the mess, don't they, though the Lord knows why!"

I became somewhat sleepy. At four I roused myself with more tea. We all started to doze again. Someone lethargically chased a pie dog away and sent it scampering abashed into the scrub and grass behind the dispersal. Looking over the aerodrome one could see the heat rising from the baked ground like the mixing of cordial in water. The Hurricanes stood patiently, their noses pointing skywards like eager game dogs, and periodically an erk would get down from the fuselage and collapse a while in the shade of its wings.

The telephone rang.

It rang gently, nobody paid much attention to it, and Tug actually answered it.

"Seraa-amble . . . Seraa—amble . . ."

Jack Gibson and I cannoned into each other as we leapt off the veranda; Stinker Murdoch muttered something like, "Oh, dear!" in his mild manner, and dropped his half-full mug of tea in the sandy earth; everyone ran like men possessed.

Why it was I, and all the others, had the prescient thought this was A—capital letters—A Raid, I cannot explain. I know we were all especially eager, and I was vilely obscene when one of my straps slipped out of my grasp and entangled itself with the hydraulic pump-lever on the left of the cockpit. It was a troublesome scramble, even if only in my imagination, because I momentarily behaved like a bad-tempered little boy who is apoplectic with his toy-train. The straps were a fuddle, the engine was recalcitrant, and when I did successfully dope it into action I immediately noticed someone had altered the setting of the rudder-bar. Ugh-urrrr!

From all the segments of the aerodrome came the throb of engines, like a challenging, long-drawn "Bayete," and then the

slim-nosed fighters, the sharks' teeth, and the Hurricanes, came eagerly out on to the runways. There was dust and more dust, the rolling beat of pairs of engines as the sections took off, and more dust. I had to abide with as much patience as I could muster by the side of the A.V.G.'s runway until they had swept by. Then with a rush and a twitching of rudder and easy puffs of brake, I got down our own runway and opened up. I didn't know who was alongside me until after I had leaned forward to the undercarriage lever and had steadied the machine to maximum climb. The C.O. was ahead, going north as arranged, his followers a blob of constantly changing outline, and I followed him as fast as I could. I made no attempt to overtake, though, for it would have done my engine no good. Looking on either side—after staring around and above carefully—I found Frank Earnshaw, Warble (Warburton), Owen Reid and, I think, another with me. Instinctively the boys fell into our squadron formation, and I led merely because I had been first off of that group. We curved left, into sun, then headed back over base.

Only as we turned did my R/T. function clearly—a not unusual occurrence with the older type of set we had at the time. Ops. was gnattering away busily. He had a good pilot and was happy to be able to put us on the right track.

"...Hello, Bandit Blue 1, Loudmouth calling; bogeys are now two miles south-west of base at angles 18: 20 miles south-west of base at angles 18. They are heading for base; they are heading for base."

A silence, then Ops. transmitted unintentionally, for I heard a remark from the Ops. room, just as one momentarily cuts in to another telephone conversation.

I increased the rate of climb by as much as I dared. We were now at 12,000 ft. Oh, Jesus, this is it, this is it—just time to get above...

"Hello, Bandit Blue 1, Loudmouth calling; bogeys now 10 miles south-west of base; 10 miles south-west of base, still heading for base!"

"Oh, Jesus, where the hell!"...I bounced up and down on my parachute pad and automatically checked over gun-button, revs, any other knob handy, in the manner of a man fiddling with his tie before he walks to the dentist's chair.

Aaah! I saw them at the same time as Ops., more urgently now, told us, "Hello, Bandit Blue 1, bogeys now approaching base, angels 18; angels 18."

That is the moment in any pilot's life, when he first sees enemy aircraft in the sky! If he doesn't see them, it's the other kind of moment when, fascinated, he watches cannon-shells rip hell out of his wings! Momentarily I paused, my mouth became so dry it seemed I had been licking thousands of stamps.

Then my thoughts raced with a hare's swift rhythm: "Must be calm...Jesus, must be calm...watch for the fighters... must get the bombers...hell, they're above us yet...must let 'em bomb the drone, can't help it...head more east and intercept 'em on the way out...O Christ, let me get one..."

When I picked them out they were flying steadily towards the aerodrome and were just over the town. Behind the bombers, holding their course with the directness of a barge's momentum, was a mass of fighters, weaving and twisting like a swarm.

I settled down, my brain concerned itself automatically with estimation of height and intercepting angles, and as I noticed the earth of the aerodrome seemingly buffeted to the lash of bombs I put my nose down and pulled everything, diving shallowly in a tremendous effort to reach them. Peering ahead intently, I saw a slow arc of flame, a comet in ecstatic pirouetting—a Jap fighter—curve down to earth. Battle had commenced!

I got below the level of the bombers, which illusorily fanned out into four sections of four aircraft apiece, but my glance was distracted by a flick of light to my right. A second later I licked my tongue anew and concentrated. What I had seen in that moment of stark apprehension had been a set of shark's teeth, diving as I was diving, but on to the fighters.

For some reason—beginner's luck—the fighters ignored me. I was pulling up and now quite calm. "Get the bead just a little ahead of the nose...steady...up to the engines..."

I kept my finger on the button and then my mind leaned back and folded arms. "Yes, they must be firing at me...oh, but look, must be my strikes on the wings of that one...and the one alongside...shift the bead, there we are...hmm, getting close..."

The silhouettes grew and grew as I overtook them, colours and even structural details became distinct, then I glanced right

again to be confronted by the starboard vic of bombers a few yards away, on a level with myself. I saw a gunner swinging...

"Holy Jesus!..." I kicked over rudder and stick and slapped the Hurricane downwards violently. Fearful of being jumped now, I plummeted to earth until I could level out only by winding back on my tail trim—the stick had frozen! But that was inexperience, and, of course, self-preservation.

None the less, my first nervousness had gone. I edged away and commenced climbing again, wary of spots in my eyes, grit on the glass screen, as a man stalking a wounded bear. In the way a man's mind will conjure up the most remote subjects under stress, I remember wondering why the hell there must always be ducks' eggs for breakfast. I was sure I would have been a nerveless ace if I hadn't been eating ducks' eggs. You will notice, too, in my account the question of what damage I'd done hardly occurs...strikes on the wings...yes. I sprayed the whole vic of four...did you see them flame or go down...? Well, no...

I climbed up to 20,000 ft. without incident, once more pure luck, for the fighters of both sides were now swarming in every direction, slowly following the bombers' trail like the turbulent wake of a large ship.

After going east at that height for a few minutes I quite calmly bethought I had better look behind me. Another fighter was coming along, too, at an easy pace. I banked round to meet it, for it had no fixed undercarriage and I was glad to meet an ally...Christ, a radial engine, one of the Oirs!

I goggled like a bumpkin at the aircraft, which could not have been chasing me for it went cruising serenely past with no attempt at attack. I caught the glint of the hood glass, the red of the roundel on its wings, then as I half-turned after it, the C.O.'s words reminded me, "No dog-fighting!" Obediently, and like a fool, for I might have got in one crack before he turned inside me, I whipped over and dived away.

Being a fool had its compensations, though, for as I looked down at the earth and intervening space I came diving into a cauldron of a dog-fight. In classic words, "There was I...!" One redroundelled fighter flew across my sights and positioned itself perfectly from my point of view. Quite coolly now, my

mind working accurately as a predictor, I calculated the deflection. my hand eased the stick back, and then I pressed the gun-button once more.

Most spectacular, when I think of it—roaring down, guns blazing death and destruction! Well, well, well, I think actually about one bullet of mine, perhaps three or four, must in reality have crepitated on his fuselage or wing, for he immediately swung over and dove down. I didn't stay to ascertain whether it was from mortal injury; this time I went slap down to the deck and sheered off. Very wisely, too, for to have lingered in that high-blood-pressured swarm of Japs would certainly have included the riddling of my machine and probably myself. Formating along with the A.V.G. boy back to base, I felt I'd had a good day—I'd damaged three bombers and nicked one fighter. Flying gaily through the buffeting overheated lower atmosphere, I became immeasurably elated. I let my aircraft down on the runway with the nonchalant, casual, but unerring deftness of experience!

I was out of the cockpit before a mechanic got near and walking rapidly towards the dispersal, from under cover of which the I.O. came eagerly to question me. There was great excitement, the ground crews lingered near and listened to every spluttered word of my tale of the fight. Apparently it had been seen, up high, and had provided them with a fine spectacle. They had been immensely cheered by the appearance of several flammers in the sky, and I wondered if maybe any of the bombers had eventually become on fire after I had left them.

The I.O. controlled my gabble and pinned me down to claiming a probable bomber and a damaged fighter. Like all pilots after their first blood-letting, my egotistic impression was that I had been almost the only one in the sky and had personally been responsible for most of the damage. Some of the others were down, too, the remainder came straggling back at intervals, but all were jubilant and excited. I think the net bag was five bombers and more fighters. The wrecks on the ground were being found for days afterwards.

However, the C.O., to bring us back to earth in mind as well as body, remarked sharply, "Blow the fighters, it's the bombers you chaps have got to go for every time!"

When Frank came down, I was elated to hear he had watched

a bomber burst into flames. From his pin-points and the fact that he had followed me in—becoming involved with the fighters—it was established as a firm confirmation of my bomber claim. I had been the only one attacking them in that area. So we let the char grow cold with our chatter.

In a quieter moment I reflected that this aerial combat up high was the nearest approach to the chivalrous jousting of olden times that one would meet in a modern war. On the ground the clash of armour and lead and Tommy gun and flame-thrower dragged down man's internecine struggles to the level of some martian obscenity; up high it was individual skill and luck, and more luck. The aeroplane, far more than any other machine of war, in its element becomes a live thing, a Pegasus that makes every gyrating air battle an adventure.

Maybe that is highflown, yet the essence of that feeling remains: I consider myself privileged to be fighting in such a pleasant way. Which is why most pilots, and I think they'll all agree, when they hear laudatory sentiments describing them as "lords of the air," or "knights of the sky," or as having, and this is the worst, "some universal quality of gay courage in their keen blue eyes"—sorry, chaps—will promptly answer: "Mush! Here, come and have a snort!"

Moreover, if you examine the records of this war's aces, you will find as many married as single, as many 28 as 18! Any glint common to the blue eyes of a squadron is almost certainly the result of the previous night's party—that hangover glassiness!

Regarding my claim, I was extremely lucky, not having seen the bomber go down, that Frank happened to be in the position of an umpire at the psychological moment. To this day, wherever the R.A.F. is fighting the Jap, it is always difficult with certainty to claim more than a "probable," i.e. the pilot saw his bullets strike the enemy, and smoke or flames come from the aircraft. What is certain beyond doubt in Burma, then and now, is that practically all of those probables are, in fact, "dead 'uns." While we were at Rangoon news came daily from some outlying village of a wrecked Jap kite. Who would say for certain that it was the one he had shot down? And how many fuselage skeletons are languishing amidst the 100-foot-high ranks of jungle covering the Chin Hills, or over beyond

the Sittang? To claim a certainty one has to see the enemy light up like a pyre; which, incidentally, where the junking, acrobatic Jap fighters are concerned, demands very accurate shooting.

That evening in the mess we were a merry crowd. The yellow-robed, hostile-looking priests were more numerous than ever, the docks were smoking as fiercely, and in the darkness one could see the flames every now and then leaping high—but we had grub, some beer, and we were doing something definite, together! That sort of comradeship is of the best. It makes me very patient nowadays when I become entangled with a boring old soldier; his reminiscing I can understand.

Eating heartily about half-nine quietened the gaiety of my mood. I chatted desultorily with Stunker and one or two of the others, but gradually my efforts to be amiable died, and I slipped off to bed. The usual reaction had set in, and I dozed off imagining-bullets coming up through the floor of the cockpit into my stomach...

That despondency cleared with the morning's rush through the cool air down to Mingaladon. The customary tea and cigarette seemed now to have a better flavour—I could claim something!

Not that there was much time for exultation, however. After breakfast the Japs came over again. I reached my machine just as Bush did. He was without one, and seeing that he was Flight Commander he politely, but firmly, told me to stay behind. It was quite right, obviously he had to take precedence, but I could have...oh, well, I ambled back slowly and then realised this was no joke; everyone was making for cover. The planes were away, and as the noise of their engines throbbed softer and more indistinct, the wail of a distant siren mournfully emphasised the anticipatory quiet.

The siren's keening ceased; I started to run, and silence enveloped the aerodrome as a mist will cover a mountain hamlet from the sun. Past the dispersal and on towards the small valley, not more than a gulch, where we had some trenches I headed for. The first trench was crammed with Warburton, Owen Reid, several of the ground crews, and baring my teeth in a smile I carried on.

Eventually I and an erk crouched down in a good spot, a

natural slit trench well away from the dispersal. By peering round the corner of the bank I could see our bamboo building. For a few minutes I crouched and breathed, beginning to sweat, feeling my heart beating strongly. Then I grew weary and stood up. Everything could have been peaceful as a deserted sylvan glade, yet it was not. We all knew what was the objective of the glistening slugs on high and the devastation they would slime behind them. The air held menace, it was too quiet.

Ah...listen! A faint guttural whisper came to our ears and gradually swelled in volume. Some guns from the town, sounding forlorn as a sniper left behind by a retreating army, gave tongue. They had the sharp note of Bofers, I mused. Peering above I caught sight of the Japanese bombers. They were high, probably on the same level as yesterday's raid, and flying in their typical, neat formation. Shadowing them came the same bunch of fighters, appearing to dance along in gnatlike confusion.

All of you who have been bombed know that it is not pleasant, and think less than nothing of those persons who braggadocio a defiant air. It is better to crouch and count sheep. On this occasion, though on the spot in both meanings, I found my curiosity did predominate. I actually caught sight of the bombs cascading down with what seemed the speed of light; and my view was of a glint, a window moved in a far-away house during a sunny afternoon.

Next instant the earth seemed to vibrate, and the explosions sounded like the roll of giant drums, while the accompanying crashes affected our ears as forked lightning crackles to the eyes. I crouched in my pit lower than hitherto I had been able to, and then it became quiet without.

Arising, my surveillance showed rings of fresh earth where bombs had fallen. Flight Guest was circling in a jeep fifty yards away, like a London taximan after a prospect, and the atmosphere was hushed again but for the receding, pleasant drone of the bombers and some crackling of a fire at the opposite side of the aerodrome. The dust slowly settled, and after first reconnoitring, like beach crabs, we all emerged from our holes.

First thing, of course, was char. With mugs in our hands we exchanged viewpoints.

"Did you see that bomb miss dispersal?"

"No, but what about that one by the Watch Office?"

And Flight Guest, grinning imperturbably, "Blimey, did you see that, dancin' all round me they were; it was like being in a shower of rain!" In very truth he was lucky to be alive, for most of the bombs had been the usual Jap anti-personnel 50 or 100 lb. ones.

Then, one by one, or occasionally in sections, the boys began to return. We forgot our own minor excitement, and listened to their accounts of what had been boiling up above. The chatter resounded like a cocktail party.

Many had returned, including the C.O., when another machine came circling round. It behaved normally, landed smoothly, and taxied up to its proper place by our dispersal. Bush, it was, and looking out he groaned quietly and slumped back in his cockpit.

"Here...fellers..." Those who heard and noticed ran over. Others, like myself, who were turning to odd tasks, looked up in mild surprise. Surely...hell, what's wrong with old Bush?

By now Doc Black had arrived, and we thronged round the machine.

Bush told us slowly, "Little b—bastards...got...me... in...the...leg...couldn't...get...away..."

We pulled away side panels and gently eased him out of the cockpit. He cried out twice in agony, and as soon as he was laid out on the ground, on a blanket, the Doc injected some drug to ease the shock and pain.

He had climbed up alone, accounted for one, had got above the Jap fighters again in preparing to attack, and then one 97 had stood on its tail and pooped wildly. A lucky bullet crashed up through his ankle and leg and the next thing he knew he was diving for earth. He had levelled out, got his foot off the rudder-bar, and then had landed normally, using his other foot for what little was necessary making a straightforward landing.

The incident quietened us. We lit cigarettes and talked softly until Doc drove him away in the ambulance, then our spirits returned to normal, and by universal instinct we concentrated on the lighter side of the individual combats. "Lines" were noted down for the book. I myself wondered whether, if I had taken off in that machine, as nearly happened, I would have

suffered the same fate ? Probably not—I don't think luck is so obvious as that !

There was no further incident, and in the afternoon I was allowed off for an hour to have a swim.

Before nightfall, the C.O. decided to send some of our machines along to Johnny Walker for safe dispersal. The moon was approaching maturity, and the danger of a night raid was an awkward contingency in view of the shortage of machines. Although our twenty warriors were working with all their enthusiasm there was a limit to their capacity. We wanted no unnecessary repair work for them.

Accordingly, as the first cool vapour of evening could be felt in the lengthening shadow, we took off in straggling, happy-go-lucky order, like buses driving back to the terminus with "Private" in their destination boxes. The strip, Johnny Walker, a few miles up the north road, was comprised of paddyfields, whose divisional walls and stubble had been levelled. What with the constant heat of the dry season, the earth was baked hard, and its surface, underneath the concealing stubble, was a pattern of miniature crevasses. As one touched down, the sensation was as different from landing on a formal runway as riding on macadam is to rumbling over cobblestones. The Hurricane did rumble, and bounced and jogged its tailwheel with such a clatter one's professional pride of flying was put out. And the dust was ten times worse than at Mingaladon, but these strips possessed the tremendous advantage that from the air they were almost invisible.

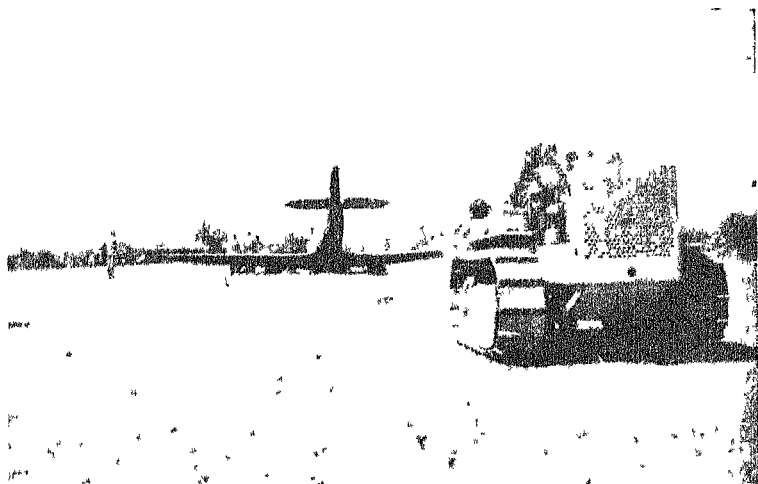
It so happened that I drove back with the C.O., the rest of the boys returning to the mess in Allan's Chevrolet. We let them pass, and in answer to their cat-calls sat staidly as two old gents in the beginning of motoring.

Those evenings were pleasant. A good day's work, that accompanying relaxing of the strings of one's spirit as a violinist rests his instrument at the close of a concert, and quiet or animated conversation with comrades—it was simple and fundamental and satisfying.

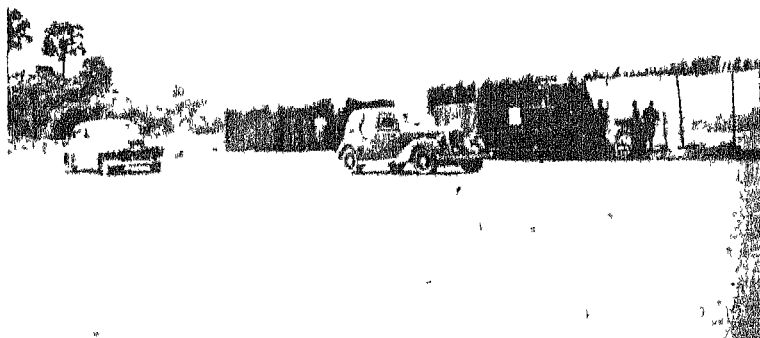
"I think it's the dreaded end, Ken !" the C.O., remarked quietly.

"What do you mean, sir ?"

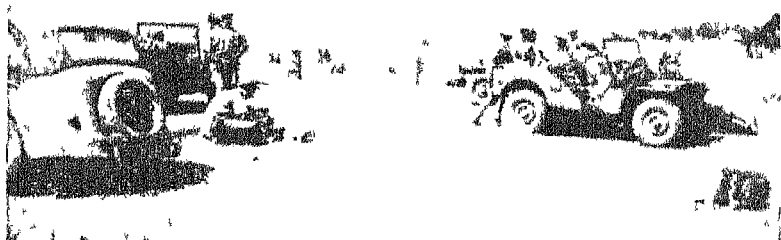
As we conversed, both of us were automatically glancing around



Allan's Prang ' Magu.



Zaigon Dispersal.



The J.W. strip. Owen Reid cooking. The Author and Tommy shooting lines.



Ken Wheatley and Tommy "Dig for Safety" at Magaoe.

and about. The road, like a dyke wall, was raised above the adjacent paddy and here and there passed through small hamlets, shaded by a few trees, by which stood impassive Burmese. They stared at us as they would have stared at animals, without any of the usual hospitable mien of humanity meeting humanity common to countryfolk the world over.

"Oh, between ourselves, things are getting a bit tight...no new machines...A.V.G. talking of packing up...Army frankly can't hold out much hope!" A pause, then he raised his tone and paid me a compliment, which made me glad.

We hummed along through more urban parts. There was the now familiar air of desolation; once we passed a blazing house not long previously looted and set afire by a band of roving locals. Pic dogs now walked as insolently in and out of dwellings, once sacrosanct, as formerly they would have snuffled at a garbage heap.

"Let's go and visit old Bush," the C.O. declared, "it'll cheer the old lad up and I want to make sure he's O.K. We'll be getting him off to-morrow to Calcutta—by Hudson, I hope!"

"Oh, that's good," I commented. "No sense in him hanging around here—and back there he'll have good grub, quiet and proper treatment."

An Anglo-Indian medical orderly at the hospital showed us to Bush and we stood around, slightly awkward at first, trying to be cheerful as one does for the sake of a friend whom you know is feeling lousy.

"Hello, you old bastard!" we first cried, and as a greeting, redolent of the squadron spirit he would be without for a long time to come it was successful. A grin spread across his pale face, which was already drawn and hollowed by what he had and was going through.

"Hello, sir! Hello, Ken!"

We chatted easily as we knew how, assuring him that we would do all in our power to fulfil any request; and the promise of an air trip to the B.M.H. at Calcutta pleased him. At last, to linger further would have had us tongue-tied. Wisely we gave his hand a shake, dug him gently in the ribs, and backed out of the shabby, bare room.

"Bye, Bush, old son!"

I'm afraid I'm not very good at visiting hospitals. When

I've been in one myself I've never wanted visitors until the convalescent stage; sleep, or if not sleep, a closed-eyes sort of daze, is my remedy for pain—and I like the daze to be solitary. The thought of Bush's wound slightly sickened me. This is strange, perhaps, considering I can maintain a philosophic composure during any contretemps, even to the death of a pilot and friend in the field. Maybe it is the atmosphere, the stoicism of the battlefield compared with the compassion of a hospital.

We had to use our headlights, for the moonlight was not quite established, and there was a nacreous haze, the forerunner of the morning mists. The air had become much cooler; strange insects in profusion impinged on our cheeks and the occasional figures our lamps revealed, in particular the yellow-robed priest by the station road, seemed to be furtive and menacing in their movements. Then the crack of a not-so-distant rifle-shot made the C.O. accelerate and we were glad to sweep up the drive to the mess. A click; complete darkness, stumbling footsteps.

Then a blaze of light, welcoming chatter. "Hello, chaps, let's have a snort? What do you want, Ken?"

We pushed forward happily among the boys and I investigated the bar shelves...

I went to sleep on the news that our warning system had broken down, and that somewhere over beyond the Sittang was a mangled, rotting corpse which had not so many hours ago been the unworthy vessel holding a rare spirit. To-morrow we would be operating from the paddy strip.

But our familiar, one of those small, off-white lizards that abide in tropical houses, "tehlk-chakkd" soothingly. His tut-tut was for the past, on the morrow all would be well!

Just as the sun topped the level of the trees east of the road we turned off and ran along the strip. The truck with the ground crews was already there. The machines were not being run up for the very practical reason that the consequent clouds of dust would give away the position of the strip to any reconnaissance plane. Having no warning system, that might happen any time.

The C.O. ordered a standing patrol overhead of two sections. He knew this was a wasteful, makeshift form of alertness, but there was no alternative. As luck would have it, I was put down for the second shift. Soon after the two pairs had jogged to one

end and then come running unevenly past us, leaping away from a spume of grit and straw, we settled ourselves in odd groups, seeking to keep cool.

The scene was quiet enough. Apart from some few creaking bullock- and buffalo-carts with wide-halted, sleepy coolies sitting cross-legged on the shafts, and an occasional cyclist, the road was desolate. On either side of us groups of more coolies, hoes and hand-scythes, pots and pans to hand, straggled along to toil, always pausing to stare at us with faces devoid of emotion as new-laid cement.

The Hurricanes glistened spottily where the night's dew was still clinging to the tailplanes and fuselage fabric, and their otherwise dusty, oily exteriors betrayed the hard use we were putting them to. There were also some Tomahawks, at one of which an A.V.G. mechanic was working indefatigably, repairing the bullet-proof screen. Yesterday one of their pilots had been injured. The few cars we had, two jeeps, an odd Morris and the trucks, were standing like picnickers, and in one truck was the starboard wing of a damaged machine, ready to be hoarded up to Magwe.

The heat was worse than at Mingaladon; it enveloped us like a blanket of leeches, sapped our energy, and sucked sweat out of us. The only escape was to fly, and as eventually we took off in our turn on patrol we were glad of a chance to cool off high up.

We had got to about 4,000 ft. and, feeling the refreshing current of morning air on my knees, I was exclaiming, "Ah-ha, what-ho for the dawn patrol!" when the joking words were stayed. The Burmese manned Ack-Ack a mile from our strip took a pot-shot at us, on the principle that anything flying must be unfriendly. Luckily they didn't continue, and perhaps almost at once realised their mistake—or went back to breakfast.

We levelled out and hummed along and'back for an hour and a half. Every second of that period we were alert; but nothing further worried us, and we returned with good appetite. Landing, each aircraft after the first touched down gropingly in the dust storm of his predecessor.

The wings commenced sizzling almost as soon as I stepped out of the cockpit.

I joined Owen, who sat cross-legged frizzling some Australian

canned sausages (God bless 'em) and tomatoes in the frying-pan. Flight Guest and his merry men already had a petrol tin full of boiling water for char, and one of the erks was busy prising open a tin of condensed milk, licking the delicious blobs of sweetness that oozed from the gashes in the metal. So we had breakfast, stuffing it down with thick slices of doughy bread and pouring tea on top of the mixture. Delicious! But in half an hour I was as thirsty again, and so it went on all day for all of us—we could not quench our parched gullets.

The A.L.O. came and aside talked quietly to the C.O. I happened to overhear a little, but the C.O. came and told us of the position. The Japs were reported to have swept across country from a point higher up the Sittang, to have shunk through in scattered parties by means of the jungly forests north of the Rangoon plain, and to have cut the road to Prome. "It's quite obvious, chaps, we shall be getting out of here any moment!" Adding, "Just to move up the road, anyhow!"

He went over to our field telephone, standing forlornly on an incongruous gramophone-case near a row of oxygen bottles and some empty petrol tins. After screaming at the microphone, he slammed it down in disgust. "They don't know what the rut's up!"

Tommy, our third American, gurgled at the news. "Well, I guess that's fine, they've cut us off...so they've cut us off!"

We laughed, too, but stopped suddenly. "Well, what the hell are you laughing at, you Chicago tough?"

In our service, for pilots it is not so serious. Our task has to be to fly away any aircraft that are serviceable, but what of the men? The situation stinks as far as I am concerned. Then, it was like being confronted with one of those idiotic "dramatic plot" dilemmas of "Should the husband save his wife or his mother if both were drowning within his ken?" Anyhow, we understood damn well, without question, that one of us would always stick with them and lead them out if we were suddenly overwhelmed; but first we'd raise hell to pack them in a bomber. Still, although that rumour about the road having been cut was nasty in its implication, we believed that we would only have to retire to another strip farther up the road. It seemed to us improbable the Jap could have got behind our lines in sufficient force to be more than a temporary nuisance.

We sipped at another mug of tea and lay supine under the wings, gazing at the haze, eyeing with suspicion every speck of a bird soaring on high, and sweating—and sweating. I was uneasy about this heat. Stinker, too, as I noticed surreptitiously, was pale and seeming lifeless. From the direction of Rangoon there came silence, and the pagoda glittered interminably. So the hours drifted, with our being perpetually nagged by the torrid air and the expectation of a visit. I closed my eyes and wondered what my wife was doing? She'd laugh to see me now...

By lunch-time the situation was still one of expectancy, of awaiting dismissal from Rangoon itself, and as my machine was taken on a reccé by Allan, I seized the opportunity to drive back to the mess and refill our empty cans of water. As we had all decided to carry our first few items of kit with us wherever we went, I stuffed mine into a small bundle and brought it along.

I think that drive back to the mess was the most eerie I've ever experienced. House after house stood like an abandoned gold-rush town. There were waggons by the score in the railway yards near Insein, but only two or three furtive individuals about. Our mess was deserted. I had to walk across to the sergeants' quarters next door to fill the cans, and I was on the *qui vive* every second for some fifth columnist or hostile Burman popping up, knife in hand. Returning to the strip, I put my foot down hard as I dare without spilling the precious water; and behind me was the pyre of the docks throwing up its perpetual billowing clouds of smoke.

"Here you are, Flight." I handed the cans out.

Flight Guest grinned. His face was now tanned a nut brown. Although dirty and sweaty, he was cheerful as ever. A grand man! He immediately set the erks to making more tea, which they needed.

The A.V.G. were moving out any moment apparently, and the C.O. was discussing with Allan, who had returned with nothing to report, about the sea approaches to Rangoon, essential details of our move. Poor old A.L.O. could not help us much, so we promised him a lift on our laps in a Hurricane, if necessary.

Ugh, what an afternoon. Heat, heat, and more heat. Tea, a cigarette which one threw away half-finished, then more tea,

another cigarette. It so happened, as Allan had used my serviceable Hurricane, I had taken over one which the crews had patched up for return to Magwe. Eventually, late afternoon, the C.O. told me to push off in that machine with Stinker, to wait at Magwe and lay my hands on more machines, and he would fly up with the rest next day, if not later that evening. A day's thorough refurbishing of our machines would enable us to go back afresh to as forward a satellite strip as conditions dictated. I was also to arrange immediately for fresh crews to come down and replace the hard-worked twenty.

We hung around until five with no activity at all, and then I clambered slowly into my machine and prepared to go.

"Meet you up at Highland Queen!" I grinned at the erk who helped me start the engine. Highland Queen was about fifteen miles farther up the road.

"Make it the George. Ruiship, will you, sir?" I smiled hugely at the thought.

Then I was leaning forward and the dust was building up as I taxied out, with Stinker coming along too. We dived down over their heads in *au revoir* and then climbed steadily away. Looking back, the strip appeared bare, forlorn, the scrappy remnants of our squadron organisation puny and defenceless—but how untrue that was, independence was our motto.

I relaxed as we approached the cultivated country around Promc, and Stinker, I know, feeling sick with heat, had never bothered about being jumped from the moment we took off. We carried on at 10,000 ft., where it was reasonably cool. Down below, the Irrawaddy twisted, like dentifrice being squeezed out in a pliant ribbon. There were any number of boats, paddle-steamers, boasting funnels, and innumerable fishing-craft and sampans. It looked so peaceful, for by the time the day is done the haze assumes a ruddy tinge which is homely in its oriental fashion.

The sight of Magwe's brick-red strip depressed me somewhat. Here would be confusion of identity, I would be unknown, and I wanted badly to return. Only the thought that my friends would be following on the morrow quietened my irritation.

After we had landed and parked our machines, I met Michael again and we got Stinker to a charpoy in the shade. He had heat-stroke all right. As soon as possible we moved him on to

the billet. Then I lay down myself. Until midnight I could not become cool, although I wasn't sweating. Not at all pleasant.

Lying back, taking very small sips of a very long whisky and soda, I told Sam what was going on down there and that everything was fixed, that we would be off again after to-morrow. He didn't get much sense out of me, although I believe I was rational enough. And that was that!

CHAPTER VI

EXILES

"Oh, the world owes me a livin'...doodle...oodle, oodle...looodle...ooh! Hummmmm...de..."

On the veranda of our hut I and Sam and Mike and Titus were washing happily. The air was pleasant, and there was no dust as yet, and the disappearance of my discomfort impelled me to sing.

Michael remarked coarsely, "What, skylarking already, must have cleared out your bowels early, Ken!"

"Yes, I am in good voice, you constipated Philistines!" I retorted, clearing my throat for another scale. Being able to dawdle was another cause of my good humour, too. I'd been having only quick sluices for so long, the mere fact of leisurely standing in my pyjama trousers with the sun warming my chest, and slowly rubbing soap into my skin and nails, was a delight. To complete my sense of well-being I put on one pair of clean shorts and to accompany it borrowed a clean shirt from Michael. Down at Rangoon, the dhobis having evacuated, my other pair of shorts had been in action for a fortnight or more.

Sam hurried us up. "Come on, you lazy oafs, I've got work to do even if the world does owe you a living!" In fairness to Michael and Titus, I must add that they had already been at the aerodrome for an hour's working.

We all settled in the jeep, Sam sitting behind the wheel like an adult on a fairy-cycle, such was his robust bulk, and drove off to the mess. The trees dappled the sunlit lawns with long shadows, and the house seemed bright with the promise of a hearty English breakfast. After sitting at the table among a

cheerful mob of pilots and staff, we received Australian sausages again! Don't get me wrong—I didn't grumble. In fact we all ate a second helping, scrounged, because the rations were limited.

The second mug of tea made me bloated as a well-fed python, and I lit my pipe, Sam offering me a fill of his special brand. It had been quite a while since I had settled down to a pipe, and I puffed in unison with Sam most contentedly for ten minutes. Titus was chatting to Michael about defence problems and transport, and I enlarged on the situation at Rangoon as Stinker and myself had left it.

"...and so, you see, they should be here to-day, for certain. Then we'll all go back to Highland Queen or whatever strip the C.O.'s been told down there is O.K. to use!"

"Well, you'd better see W/Cdr. Woodhouse this morning. Ken," Sam commented, "he's in charge of the fighters, as you know. Now what about fresh ground crews to relieve those chaps who've been down there all this time?"

"Yes, the C.O. said he'd want a new lot to go down at once; but, I take it—when he's come up here and the other lot are on their way here by road!"

"Mmm, yes," Sam muttered, weighing it up. "No good sending them off to some uncertain destination, is it!"

Thus we conversed comfortably, knowing one another well, as if we were sitting at our old mess in England discussing squadron affairs. It was an hour I savoured to the full. Then we all trundled off in the jeep to get to our tasks.

However, before calling at S.H.Q.—the Wing Commander was not there as I later found out—I hopped in alongside Michael in his servicing truck, leaving Sam, and the pair of us called at the dispersal tent on the aerodrome. Michael remarked on some of our squadron pilots being there, including Tex Barrick, Wisrodt, Allan MacDonald, Jack Gibson, who had been sent back with U/S. machines at one time or another like myself.

They were glad to see me for they were uncertain in mind, apart from the muddle induced by their present environment. By untoward chance marooned at Magwe awaiting our machines, they were acting on readiness with an odd assortment of other squadron pilots. I realised forcibly what conditions were like as a Blenheim came taxiing down, turning round opposite the

tent, blasted over us a miniature sandstorm, and then took off. That was going on all day. The tent housed nothing beyond a broken-down locker for maps, helmets, etc., and water was at a premium.

They were fed up that they could not fly off there and then in the patched up machines and rejoin the C.O. This was a case of conflicting interests. Quite rightly some machines had to be kept at Magwe, which was always liable to be raided from the east, and the only other protection it had at that time was the battered Buffaloes of 67 Squadron, who were housed in another tent on the other side of the runway. The A.V.G. machines were just moving in from down south.

"The C.O.'s coming up here, to-day, blokes," I told them in confident cheerfulness, "then we'll have a sort-out and get cracking together again."

As it transpired my confidence was unjustified, but I wasn't to know. And it was typical of the squadron spirit, that *although* they were so browned-off with their invidious position away from the rest of the boys, they had found one compensation. A hint from the A.V.G. had led them to investigate the oil town, Yenang Yaung, about an hour's driving up the road to Mandalay. They had slipped off one evening and had filled themselves with a hell of a meal—bacon, chicken, ice-cream, coffee—at the American Club there.

"Don't, I can't bear it," I grimaced. "What, lovely, luscious food in gorgeous technicolour... where is this place?"

Tex grinned. "We'll show you, Gritty, and I'll buy you a gimlet."

"What's that?"

"Oh, it's a kindov gin and lime and lots of ice," he drawled.

On that more cheerful note I left to interview the Wing Commander. Scrounging a jeep from Michael, I searched this building and that, eventually locating him in the newly-designated Ops. Room, formerly one of the private buildings of the square. He listened quietly to my account of how, and why, I had arrived, and when I said the rest would be following, he shook his head.

"We've no news here. So far as we know things remain down there as they are, the positions rather static, although it's right enough that we shall have to fall back to those other strips, perhaps."

He looked down at his desk. Then he told me he wanted me to stick around and handle the odds-and-sods flight at Magwe and temporarily work under his control. And that was that. The question of taking more Hurricanes down to the C.O. would arise when the C.O. himself came, or we got definite word through. I was still confident though; at any moment I expected to look up and see the boys circling round, coming in to land.

There was nothing else to do, so I went back to dispersal and acquainted myself with the existing routine. It was normal readiness in shifts. There had been an occasional scramble so far after odd reconnaissance Japs, but that was all.

Sitting there, I was sorry to learn that I had missed the sight of Bush. Sam had come and told us Bush had just passed through in a Hudson, on his way to Calcutta and the hospital.

"By God, he looked pale and ill. He's saying it's bloody hot in those machines."

"Yes; Hudson, any kite for that matter, are when they're standing on the ground."

"—and for all they're being most considerate the lad's getting some unpleasant jolts."

However, by the time I heard this he was over the Sunderbunds, on the last lap. We went off and had lunch and some char.

As we drove to and fro, I noticed the Magwe country appeared more parched than the Rangoon area. Sam told me it was in fact in the "dry" belt and received nothing like the rainfall of Rangoon, which is a byword. The hedges and vegetation intervening among the fields were scrublike; the cattle were scrawny, and the flesh hung from their necks in folds as if they, too, needed a monsoon. But hither and thither, all day long the bullock-carts were being driven, many of them helping to cart war materials for us. The Burmese sat on their loads, protected by their wide-brimmed hats, and often fell asleep as they creaked along. Was there a war on? What did they care!

The afternoon I spent muddling around the tent. It was as hot as down at Johnny Walker, there was more dust even, and we were at our worst. Tex Barriek and I suddenly gave tongue in some petty argument which concluded with us stalking away in opposite directions, fuming, and the others were languid, morose. It was all symptomatic of our frustrated instinct to be

together as a squadron. I felt browned off again, so after arranging to take my turn on the morrow in the readiness roster, I wandered off to the billet and fell on my charpoy. It was easy to doze off: what we described as having a zizzzz!

Curiously enough, after that squabble with Tex (we have remembered and laughed at it since) I fell to thinking kindly of the odd personalities of our squadron. Of Bush, Allan, the C.O., Tex, Jack, Ken, others you have been given an outline, but there was Rathbone, a big lad, dark-haired and unhurried in movement, who had got one at night at Mingaladon, thereby upholding the county of the red rose. He, the stout Lancashire protagonist, and Tex Wisrodt who, I believe, came from southern U.S.A. *via* Chicago, had struck up an incongruous friendship in England. Tex had been moved by the welcome given him by "Basil" Rathbone's parents, and I thought of the two of them as the Anglo-American Corporation.

There was "Tommy" Thomas. A shock of black hair, angular features, profile and legs both knobbly and, to be polite, horsey in outline, were his characteristics. He could take a joke against himself better than most, was American directly from Chicago, and was proud of his ability at street-fighting. He did not drink, and our happiest memory of him was in a Manchester hotel, where to keep us company in a final binge before embarkation, he had consumed twelve ginger ales! We considered that a true token of friendship.

"Stinker" Murdoch, always placid and reliable, was of medium height, had thin hair on top of a regular, rounded face. His blue eyes were mild, but shrewd. At home, some of the squadron bowmen had tried to put him under the table when he had brought his wife along to the mess just before we left—but he had more than coped.

Then the ground crews. There are so many I am familiar with by face and name, I would hesitate to pick any few out. Their characteristic was, as it should be in any good squadron, a bloodthirsty willingness to work, provided we returned with bullet holes in our kites and a score...

Sam, newly returned from his office, woke me with the message that I had to arrange for a night flare path and night readiness. Ops. were worried about the moon. I cursed, and reluctantly got up to drive out to dispersal again.

There was some difficulty in obtaining sufficient glim lamps and goose-neck flares, but by scrounging and prodding various vague personnel, it was at length arranged.

After a meal, I took a pillow and went back to the tent to sit there throughout the night myself. There was no self-sacrifice about that; I had a good sleep later on, undisturbed by any raiders. What is more, a lad from another squadron, one of the men on duty with me, Tommcliffe, produced a notable whisky and iced soda! Yes, I said iced!

Tropical countries are loveliest at dawn and dusk, I think. That evening I had to observe the way the dust hung delicately precipitated in the rosy air, while over to the west the ranges at the far side of the Irrawaddy appeared like soft clouds under a ruddy flame of sun. Before I fell off to sleep the silence became noticeable, like the transition in a vehicle from macadam to grass. Once in a long while a rifle cracked. Who cared!

At something like four in the morning, under a watery, gibbous moon, I looked out from under the flap to see two Indian soldiers walking along with what seemed to be a hosepipe. Again, who cared! I lay back on my bed of scruffy Mac Wests and slept again until breakfast time. Then I joked with the boys coming on readiness, and went off for my meal.

Over some more of these bloody ducks' eggs Sam and I discussed the whereabouts of the C.O. We had no answer throughout the day, for nobody came up from the strip down south and we could get no news from S.H.Q. But Michael and myself, out inspecting machines during the afternoon—rather myself gossiping while Mike did his rounds—were heartened to see as many as eight Hurricanes come circling in to land. Their long-range tanks told us instantly they were reinforcements.

There was a pother of taxying and sorting out of this machine to that dispersal point, and then I was greeting Ricky Chadwick, the man I'd married back in England. Shall I explain?—he was my friend, a tall, loquacious, perky Canadian of irrepressible spirits. To him I had given the advice, when he was considering the matter at the last moment, "Go on, marry the girl, what does money matter!" And I had been his best man.

This was good. We had machines, we had pilots, my friend was now come to muck in with me. I hurried Ricky back to our billet, and poured a long whisky down his throat and listened to

his story. With him, too, were Peters, Merrit, Miller, Slim Lewis, all of our squadron, although as recent as Cairo in their attachment to us.

"Well, Gritty," Ricky burred, "I've got here too late, I suppose."

"On, No ! . . ." I grinned back. "Don't you believe it, we're going strong, son ; and boy, am I glad to see you and these Hurricanes ? . . . do we need 'em ? Honestly, Ricky, down at Rangoon we've almost had to put the local lavatory-pot manufacturer on to making spares for us, we've been so pushed !"

"Where are the rest of the boys ?"

I laughed at this leading question. "Well, I'll tell you all." Then I explained the state of bewilderment we were in at the moment.

He listened and sighed at a similar experience of his own. "I damn nearly got sent down to Colombo," he complained. "At Karachi, *after you'd left*, we nearly got split up ; lots of pilots have been diverted, some at Calcutta for defence, and others down to Ceylon. But I made it, didn't I ! On, B—O—Y !"

Grinning again, I yelled at him, "Oi, have another drink, son !"

Eventually he stowed away his kit, had a wash, and then we walked out for tea. It developed into a reunion, for immediately outside we encountered Doc Black and Flight Guest, who sat back in their jeep and just chuckled. They were dusty, tired, dirty, but happy.

"Well, where've you come from ?" was all I could think of saying.

"Oh, we've just had tea and iced cakes at the Silver Grille, sir. Hope you don't mind my being away so long !" was Flight's instant wisecrack. Then they explained the C.O. had sent Doc and some of the crews back. We hauled the Doc and his gear out of the jeep, and Flight Guest cheerfully drove off, after I had directed him to the sergeants' quarters.

Privately Doc confided the men were whacked. "Not that they weren't willing, Ken ; but day and night, it was heart-breaking trying to keep those machines in the air !"

He added, after a swig, "They'll have to be replaced by some of the men here, who've been having a gay feasting, no doubt !"

"Yes, but Doc, what the hell's the C.O. doing?" I gabbled. "You know when I left he was expecting to come up here any moment, if only temporarily... Sorry." I finally exclaimed, "you must be browned off with all the travelling. Come inside and relax." We shepherded him and his luggage right inside the hut.

I think Sam joined us almost as soon as we had got inside, and so it became quite a conclave. Doc grinned as we set another drink in his hand. Looking round approvingly, his normally serious face broke composure. "Oooh, you bastards, setting yourselves up vurry nicely, eh!"

Then he related how, on the afternoon Stinker and I had flown up, they had lingered at Johnny Walker, hearing from no one, and finally had pegged the machines down for the night and gone back to the mess at Insein in the usual way. The boys of the other squadron, who also were still operating in reduced numbers from Mingaladon, returned too.

That evening S/L. Barry Sutton and our C.O. both learned that the situation was static, although it was certain that a withdrawal was in the offing, and that they might be hanging on for several days. In consequence, Doc went on, the C.O. was dissatisfied on account of the limited number of his ground crews and therefore ordered Doc to come up to Magwe by road with as many as could be spared—a euphemistic term, the numbers were already limited to the bone. Reliefs were to be flown down to-morrow morning, without fail.

Sam and I looked at each other. He got up, sighed, and then went about the matter immediately. I followed him outside to the car, and we agreed Sgt. Moody should be sent with the necessary crews.

"I'll go to S.H.Q. and see about the trip, Ken," Sam directed. "You go and roust out Moody and he'll know who to pick out, he and Guest between them."

So we both proceeded, and by the time the arrangements were made, Doc had leisure to wash, shave, and take breath. He needed it, for he was another, like Stinker, who could not take the heat easily. His coming up dovetailed; for the other squadron Doc was down below to deal with the two parties there, while he could look after the squadron ground crews at Magwe.

As we all went along for dinner, we inquired what the C.O. wanted pilots to do? Doe said the C.O. wanted sections to fly down in turn, each having aircraft in good condition, so there would be a continuous relief and exchange effected, while the shuffling of aircraft would also ease the work of the skeleton crews down at the strip.

"So far as I can remember, Ken, the C.O. says you're to stick here for a few days looking after our boys. Anyhow, he'll be flying up himself any time!"

I nodded thoughtfully. "I've been told already to wait here a day or two. I'll bet one or two of the boys who've been here a while go in the first batches, then I'll slip off myself."

So that was that. I felt relieved at knowing something definite, and the prospect of getting away again was good. Whether I went down to Johnny Walker or Highland Queen, or a strip nearer still, depended ultimately on what the Army and R.A.F. H.Q. at Rangoon decided. As the successful passage of Doe and Flight Guest and his men had shown, the scare of the Japs cutting the road at Pegwe was—at that time anyhow—illusory, as we had suspected. Although it wasn't some few days later!

You may wonder why the shifting of H.Q. was such a jump as from Rangoon to Magwe. I am no staff officer, but from the Air Force point of view it was simply this: Rangoon had a main aerodrome and a number of satellites, and Magwe was the only other comparable base ready at that time. Therefore the jump was logical enough, but to keep what little fighting force we had forward for action we would use the newly-prepared paddy strips dotted up the road, such as Highland Queen, next Zaigon, then the one at Promé. In effect, it was the same policy as the Japs, who only moved their fighters and bombers to aerodromes at the front as and when required for specific raids.

That was how I interpreted the situation, and Sam was in agreement. But what of this "situation" anyway, Ricky and I and the other pilots laughed. It was up to us to slip away and join the boys as soon as could be managed. In the meantime, philosophically, we had a snort. We went to bed pleased with life and its prospects. I lay chatting to Ricky, giving him the "gen" until our two voices dwindled, slurred, and we could keep our eyes open no longer.

Four more Hurricanes arrived the next morning, and we were

most optimistic. If this stream would continue, perhaps the squadrons could be brought to full strength once more and we could really tweak the Japs' tails. However, that day Mike found it impossible to bring any of them to us for taking down south. A number were allocated to 67 Squadron, to replace their battered radials, and, the practical consideration, it took time and sweat to remove the long-range tanks and ancillary apparatus. So, with the half-dozen or so machines dotted around the tent, we carried on normal readiness.

I arranged not to be on that morning and drove round with Ricky, acting as guide. As I had exclaimed aloud, so he expressed himself volubly about the filthy pie dogs. He chuckled, too, at the solemnity and apparent incongruity of the stolid Burmese squatting on their bullock-carts, wearing their great black hats; and after all this he was stimulated by the idea of being in the midst of a seething campaign. For all its uncertainty, he and I and the other pilots never found it anything but zestful. Only the C.O. hugged to himself his fear, an understandable contingency he had to contemplate, of having his men surrounded and hacked to pieces.

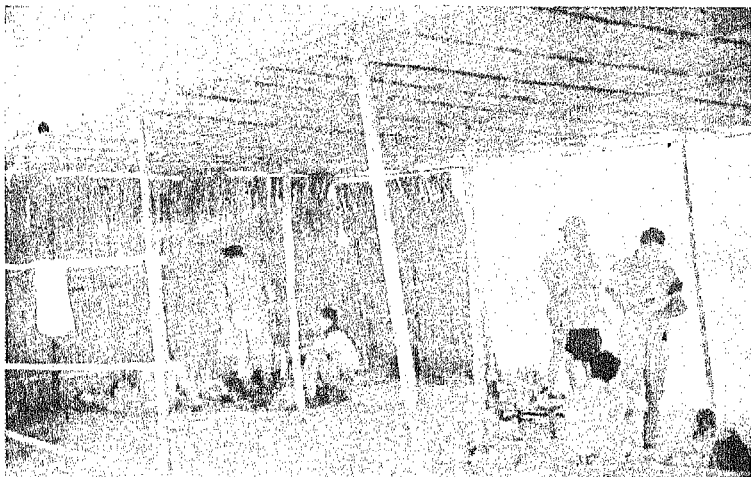
He made a business call at the M.T. yard at one corner of the village green—I found out that day it was a polo ground—and there met Wing Commander Carey, looking at his car with a disgusted expression. It was a large saloon and its brakes were acting only when they felt inclined. The harassed M.T. section could do nothing about it; they were in the same predicament as the squadron engineers—without spares. The only way they were coping was by dismantling an odd vehicle and making it a "Christmas tree."

"Hello, sir, what's the trouble?"

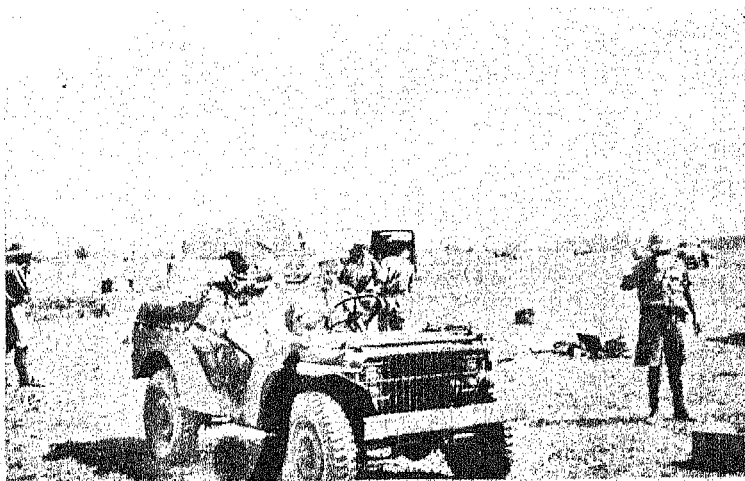
"Do you want a nice luxurious chariot, Ken?"

I looked at the Wing Commander. Ricky, who had some knowledge of automobiles of this class, nudged me and suggested a swap. With Sam's permission, later obtained, I exchanged one of our spare jeeps for the Wing Co.'s car.

It was one of those silly incidents that enlivened the monotony of the heat. There were plenty of vehicles available, and I fancied the car, ostensibly to run the boys to and fro on readiness, as a woman desires a new hat. Maybe the Wing Co. will remember? Anyhow, Ricky soon had the car in order and there



Zaigon. Our Dispersal. Bob Stout (lounging), Ray Prince (now killed), the C.O., W/C. Pennington Lee (now killed), Tex Barrick (standing).



Johnny Walker. "Brownie" in the jeep. "Chiefy" Guest drinking away.



Our Akvab Shelter Allan M., Tommy Jim Regis (A.V.G. Photographer), Author Jack Gibson



3 6 1 12

An A.V.G. "shark" scrambles.

I was, P/O. "Prune" Hemingway, as 'twere, floating around crazily in luxury in the midst of battle. You should have seen Sam's face when we rolled up to the billet with it.

During that day, and the ensuing two, until the C.O. flew up from Highland Queen, as the pilot nominally in charge of the boys at the tent, I had much to do with the Wing Co.s Carey and Woodhouse. As I realise now, the two of them were working out the reshuffles contingents upon the final evacuation from Rangoon proper. If I remember rightly, the former was flying down almost every other day to his old squadron at Mingaladon to keep in touch.

There was some excitement the next day, March 3rd, when we were on readiness in the morning. At breakfast-time, just before I arrived with Biff Viens and Ricky, some reliefs for the day shift, the boys had a scramble. We were knocking back the final mug of tea when we saw them take off. Excitedly we imagined raids starting on Magwe regularly, and we drove down to the tent, leaving a great whirling cloud of dust behind us, in which passers-by, the villagers, had to stand with faces averted and their cloth garments pulled round their mouths until it settled.

However, the boys came down after half an hour, having seen nothing. Ops even were not sure that any hostile aircraft had been overhead, for their warning system was improvised; but they had a mysterious plot on their board.

One of the pilots, clambering from his machine, came in and cursed, "Bastards, they always come at meal-times. Boy, am I hungry! . . . Say," asking us, "what's for breakfast?"

We were pulling their legs mildly and all chuckling at the incident, when we were interrupted by one of the ground crew asking, "Listen, sir, can you hear a bomber droning around?"

We quietened and looked warily about. Yes, there was a bomber cruising around in the haze above somewhere, high enough for the sound of its engine to be indeterminate. The next moment we all ducked instinctively.

"Bang, bang. . . errump!" That was a bombing noise if ever I knew one. We started to run away from the strip for cover then we all slowed and halted. It was curious, a hush seemed to pervade the aerodrome, yet there were no bombers overhead. What was going on?

Eventually we settled down to readiness, and Ops. reassuringly said they had no enemy plots at the moment. It was revealed later that one of our own Blenheims had been forced to return from a trip and it had jettisoned its bombs out in the open country near us.

We grinned. Jack Gibson remarked, "Jest shows, I saw Gritty takin' off for them thar slit trenches as soon as he heard the old familiar crack."

I nodded. "And if I'd jumped in the trench I'd have kicked you up the bottom, too, wouldn't I?"

During the day it was arranged to send two aircraft and pilots down to Rangoon, and the Wing Commander decided the first section of reliefs should be sent to the other squadron at Mingaladon. That freed me of the problem of selecting from our boys who was to go. Anyhow, Mike and the crews, sweating away continuously throughout the day, were on the final stages with almost all the new machines that had arrived.

That evening, gathered together in our long bamboo hut, we were principally concerned with laundrying. Because of the general move northwards, dhobis were completely unreliable, inasmuch if one did present himself for service, like as not the following day he would have vanished, with all our clothes. Personally, I wasn't bothering all that much. I'd put on a clean shirt, shorts, and stockings a day or so ago and I'd think about the problem in another ten days' time. However, we could get a decent sluice down in the compartment at the end of the hut.

The hour grew late. We all sat outside, using the veranda floor as a seat and dangling our legs from it. In the moonlight the trees looked homely, we chatted of other things than war, and our pipes and cigarettes burned smoothly.

Sam asked thoughtfully, almost wistfully, "Wonder if the lads have run out of beer?"

Doc snorted with amusement. "Might as well ask if Niagara's run out of water!"

In the half-light, we grinned unseen; mood and feeling passed to and fro as in daylight expressions interplay.

Ricky chuckled, "I like this, it's good, reminds me of when we used to go out camping in Canada."

Mike commented, "You're quite right, Ricky, the tropics aren't bad at dawn and in the evening——"

A groan and a jeer from Sam, myself, Titus, the Doc, and Ricky stilled his rhapsodising.

"Sure," Ricky exclaimed, "it's swell, the gyppo tummy, and pie dogs and half-starved animals and locals just waiting to slit your throat, and shopkeepers charging not ten times normal prices but fifty times...sure, I *love* it! No, you sap, I mean being with you makes all the difference, sweetheart!"

We affected emotion. "Oh, Ricky, this is so sudden!"

Nevertheless they were both right, I reflected. We well knew what Ricky was expressing: the being together, the sticking together, made all the difference. Otherwise, merely as a cog in a service—which can be more lonely than big cities—we would have lacked enthusiasm. Contrariwise, how restful were those odd evenings we spent at Magwe! After dusk the heat was debilitated, the dust was laid, and for an hour after feeding we could afford to think, just as we would have made discussion outside a pub of a summer's evening in peacetime. There are similar moments in all services, surely, at some intervals, however irregular.

The quiet surrounded us unobtrusively as the tide runs in. Over on the roadway beyond a villager trudged on some idle errand; a cart was creaking quietly, peacefully along, and over on the green some pie dogs padded round a ditch, only an occasional scuffling bark floating to our ears as evidence of the courtship. I pointed out the North Star, showing the others how to distinguish it by alignment with the Horse and Plough. "...and over there...that's England!"

"Ah!" Sam muttered, getting up and stretching. One by one we slipped inside to sleep. Out at the aerodrome, the machines glistened icily under the moon. On their rough charpoys, the two lads on night readiness were sleeping as easily as dogs on a mat, and the blurred figure of an Indian guard would walk silently around at intervals. A jackal, its bush to ground, slunk from behind a tail-plane and padded across the runway and made off towards the men's billets.

I lay and wondered what my wife was doing. Occasionally an odd strange scuffle outside disturbed me, but I was fast ridding myself of a townsman's qualms. "Umm...yes...if we're four hours' behind—or is it in front?" Wrestling with that old, old problem, and finally relapsing with the impression

that she would then be having lunch, I turned over and dozed.

On the following day, two more Hurricanes went down south and I think a couple returned, in appearance distinctly battered. Allan MacDou' was one of the pair who went down. I and Michael and Sam were pottering between the aerodrome and S.H.Q. morning and afternoon, calling about this and that matter. The days dragged on, the expected evacuation still did not materialise, and that certain confusion as to what was happening at Rangoon hung around.

After lunch I busied myself with an important matter. We had, naturally enough, received little or no mail since we had been in Burma, for letters were still chasing us from the A.P.O. address given us before our original setting out for the Middle East. But rumour had it there was an odd bag or two of mail at S.H.Q., not sorted because of lack of hands. Some of us accordingly drove round and had a look through, helping with the sorting at the same time. None of the pilots was lucky, but we brought to light a few letters for certain of our ground crews. That was something, and we hoped maybe more would follow in a short while. Believe me, mail is one of the biggest factors in keeping up morale of fellows overseas. Clothing, tobacco, having a wash, beer, one can do without in hot countries, but grub and mail are the staff of service life.

That night I went on readiness with Jack Gibson. As the sergeants had a lousy meal that particular evening, I took with me some chicken and tea and bread. Don't conclude that we officers were lording it while the men broke their teeth on bully; every man's diet was founded on one standard—the rations. The chicken we had that night at our mess was the result of an astute scrounge on the part of one of the staff. An example of what the sergeants could do. On another day when I dined with them, they produced peanut butter, canned peaches, and tinned cream! Oh boy...!

Jack and I ate slowly, drank in sips and enjoyed a cigarette. The full moon was round as a billiard ball, and the character of its terrain, a coin's markings, was distinct as a distant view.

He was reminded of his own country, and I promised to visit him after the war. I hope I will, I want to taste his, "Now, if you want *real* corn-on-the-cob, Gritty'..." He thought he-

might continue flying after the war. I argued for returning to one's previous occupation—there would be too many pilots on the market. So we chatted and fell asleep on the charpoys. As we were dozing off, a soldier came and indicated he wanted to know the time. I told him—as I have told hundreds of Indian soldiers. It seemed to be a national habit, their “Kitna budge?”

March 5. Jack and I cocked a sleepy eye at each other and rolled upright with a yawn. After a drink of coldish tea out of my Japanese thermos, I went sauntering into the open. In parts, in the tracks off the aerodrome where the carts creaked along, the dust was so heavily piled my foot sank into it and walking became an effort. The morning sun for once was softened by a pearly film of cloud in the east over the far-flung ranges. The air was pleasant, as yet untainted by the day's traffic. So we watched the sun rise and the heat start dancing up from the runway and road. At half-eight the reliefs came in a flurry of dust and chatter and the two of us went off to eat.

I was determined to wangle permission to go down with the next section, for in one sense I was really uncomfortable at Magwe. It seemed foolish for us to be there, if the squadron was still to operate below. I felt sure the C.O. would want all of us with him if possible. So, after calling at M.T. for petrol, I went to Ops. house and was about to enter when I noticed a Hurricane circling to land. Maybe that's the C.O., I mused. It was!

After finding the Wing Co. out, I returned to the billet and then carried on to the mess. And there I found it had been the C.O. He was dirty and tired, but on the whole fit and cheerful. Leastways any browned-off feeling he concealed. He ticked me off over a certain matter, but we found it developed from a misunderstanding, so when Sam and Michael joined us for lunch I had nearly full marks again. Over lunch he gave us the gen.

The squadron had moved from Johnny Walker to Highland Queen, but the Japs were definitely out hunting for them and the others. The retirement from Mingaladon was really about to be accomplished any moment, and the lack of warning, plus the many patrols of fighters the Japs were sending over in an attempt to jump us or hunt out our strips, was making life extremely full-blooded.

“What I'm frightened of, Sam,” the C.O. said pensively, “is

being caught on the ground on a strip and losing the whole bloody issue. Then we would be popular!"

His visit was to sort us out and also to discuss the project of only using the forward aerodromes for refuelling, assuming we came out of Rangoon in entirety. What pleased me was that I had been nominated among the next batch to be sent down. Quite contentedly I left them to go on afternoon readiness.

In the afternoon the C.O. sent Ricky and one of the other squadron types down. Ricky grinned at me as he taxied out. "See you to-morrow, Gritty!" he yelled, and swung the machine so as to cover me in dust!

I saw him on the morrow—but definitely!

With the C.O. and the other boys we had been promulgating various details in preparation for nearly a full flight to take off after lunch. I was actually down at the tent, with my small bundle like a tramp's red-handkerchiefed possessions, when there was a drone and a roar and out of the sky like raindrops mysteriously falling on a summer's day came the boys!

Ricky, Frank, Warble, Allan MacDou', Tommy, Neville Brooks, all came walking swiftly and excitedly from their machines to the tent. I picked up Ricky in the jeep and he was talking fast, still laughing at the ludicrousness of a situation in which it slowly penetrated my brain, they should have lost their lives. We crowded round, and they all gaggled away at once.

Ricky's version was, "Oh, Boy...there we were, peacefully strolling around the strip (Highland Queen), we'd just had breakfast and I was full of tea as a Y.M.C.A. bar counter. Someone remarked it would be funny if they low-levelled us at that moment, and I looked over my shoulder...OMG BOYXX! I took off! There was one of these little 97s about five hundred yards away just running meekly up the strip—and lots more, right behind him! BOYXX...we did the hundred yards back to those trees and trenches in just no time at all!"

Neville Brooks, a well-built lad, even-tempered and a cool flyer, a credit to Rhodesia, raised his eyebrows and fervently nodded, "Was I annoyed, Ricky beating me to that trench! I could feel those bullets pranging my bottom any second!"

From then on, dodging bullets among the tree trunks the boys caught glimpses of the 97s insolently strafing and also giving an exhibition of acrobatics at the same time.

Tommy gurgled out, "Did you see 'em? They'd run up a Hurry, then pull up, loop, roll off, and back down the runway again! They knew we hadn't got a thing to pot at 'em with!"

We took them to see the C.O. and walked into him at the mess, where he was just about to leave, having concluded a final pow-wow with Sam. I shall remember his face: his jaw dropped slightly, his eyes sparkled like a blob of stout in the sun, and he exclaimed bitterly, "What's this...beaten up! Is everyone all right?"

Tommy explained what had happened. The C.O. cursed. Tommy finally pointed out a noticeable fact—as a result of the strafing they lost only one machine! The inaccuracy of the Jap's air-to-ground firing was later confirmed, incidentally, by a similar experience when the squadron was in China.

"I knew it, I knew it," the C.O. boiled. "I knew that without any kind of warning system we should be bounced sooner or later! What a bastard!"

He also inquired of the ground crews. Allan had gone up with them to the next strip, which was at Zaigon about fifteen minutes' flying below Prome.

The C.O. nodded. "Yes, that's good—and they're none of them injured?"

"No, sir, all O.K."

He rushed off to confer with the Wing Co. as to the next move. Highland Queen, now located by the Japs, was obviously untenable except as a mere refuelling strip.

We wondered also what was happening to the other squadron's pilots down on Mingaladon. Had the evacuation of Rangoon been ordered? Had they been caught out? We talked and argued among ourselves all afternoon and went over that incident again and again. One good thing, I observed—the boys were not shaken, it was instead a terrific joke, the way one had seen another haring for cover like a rabbit for its hole.

But the war was still on, some of us had to return to readiness. We sat at the tent, talking away with a mug of tea in our hands. The C.O. drove up and joined us. His news was that the other squadron had been ordered out of Rangoon and that a fresh flight of ourselves would go down in the morning to 'Zaigon and operate from there, mucking in with Barry Sutton's lot.

We decided it wouldn't be a bad idea to go off that evening to the oil town and have a civilised meal and a bath at Jack's friend's house before we proceeded on the morrow to our strip and bamboo-hut residence. The C.O., now in good humour, agreed.

"Take some of the lads who've just come up, Ken. Must be back at breakfast-time though. We shall go off about 9.30, I should say. Have to see Wing Commander Carey first, when he returns, which should be this evening or first thing in the morning."

So that evening, as the sun relaxed behind the hills, a Plymouth packed with pilots speeded off along the narrow road to Yennan-Yaung, the oil town. As I drove we sang, and interspersed was a shouted account of Tommy's adventure on one of the patrols down south.

During the return from one of a succession of Blenheim escorts and offensive patrols, they had encountered a bunch of 97s. Tommy, chuckling as usual, from his squashed posture in the back, shouted out at me, "And don't you believe this tale about the Japs being ready to ram you, hari-kari fashion, Ken. I met one head-on and I held my sights on him...boy, oh boy, was I trembling, huh, ha-ha-ha!" he giggled in his characteristic, high-pitched way, and made us all laugh with him; "...but he made a mistake, he pulled up, thinking he could flick back on my tail...but it was easy then, as his belly came above me I just pulled up and with one burst had him!"

He continued, giggling again, "After that it was time to get away, they were turning inside us, all over the place, so I pushed off and was doing a steady speed when I saw a Hurry coming up, in my mirror. I thought, 'Oh, this'll be Allan.' But, hell, it wasn't Allan at all, it was an OI...the first thing I saw were the flashes from his gunports..." And Tommy went off into that chuckling gurgle of his.

Ricky grinned. He was sitting beside me. "Gosh, that's funny, Tommy. Stop the car, Ken, I'll wet myself!"

We all chuckled so much I'm sure from outside the car must have appeared as if it were itself bouncing with glee.

Someone commented on the heat inside the car and I discovered we needed water, so we pulled up alongside a well at the roadside. There was a Burmese hut opposite and a tiny

shrine, and resting nearby some villagers with their cattle—scrawny, tired beasts. A fire and the smell of curry indicated they were awaiting their evening meal. One friendly old man, his wrinkled face grinning amiably below his dirty cloth turban, tottered over and with true country hospitality proffered a large earthenware jar for our use. We smiled our thanks, filled up the radiator, thanked him again and proceeded.

While the boys chatted idly I fell silent driving, but had time enough to take note of the countryside. The road was macadamised but there were no curbs, and on either side the cart-tracks into which the creaking, two-wheeled vehicles reluctantly plodded as we overtook them were grooved and ankle-deep in powdered earth. The landscape now undulated; between areas of cultivation and odd hamlets of dusty-looking bamboo hutments were thickets of scrub and treacherous small ravines deep enough to trap a tank. This was truly the dry belt.

As we approached the oil town we could see to our right the hundreds of derricks, bunched and close as pine needles, and the horizon surged into a series of ups and downs. Driving into the town, we found the house and derricks and shop were scattered on this hillock and that; from the American Club, where we first stopped for a drink, to Jack's rendezvous, the bungalow of his compatriot, "Slim" Bennett, we went down this hill and up another, switchback fashion. But it made a pleasant change.

Jack warned me that Slim, an oil technician, disliked Englishmen. "But he won't mind you, Gritty!"

I grinned. I knew that when Englishmen and Americans did dislike each other it was a thing not to be argued about, like a family feud. As a member of the clan not interested in such quarrels, I was prepared to be diplomatic in the cause of the *entente cordiale*.

However, Slim showed true American hospitality and treated us all—Jack, myself, Tex Barrick, Ricky, as if we were his own sons. He was a tall, grey-haired man, with a not obtrusive accent, and obviously a character. His bungalow was comfortable in casual bachelor fashion.

At first sight he gave me a sharp glance; but I kept quiet, and after he had pottered round, helping us to a hot bath and making sure we had every comfort, we sat convivially and had a drink. He also directed his cook to produce a delicious dinner

of steak, chips, some sort of peche melba and, inevitably, very good coffee.

As we sipped a gin with him afterwards and smoked his cigarettes, he turned on the wireless for the news, in which he took an anxious interest. The odd accounts of our doings fascinated him. I liked him, for the man with an ingrained cuss at my race he was kindness in excess.

He sent us off to have a drink with the other boys at the Club as an uncle will grinningly let loose his nephews on some spree normally forbidden by parental control.

We found the boys had got hold of some champagne, of all things, and with the A.V.G. we had quite a session. I slept that night between Ricky and Jack, on two beds pulled together. Slim's was a strange life, I thought, but reminded myself how ignorant of all these little communities of the world I had been before the war.

Slim had prepared for us a grand breakfast, early, of fried chicken, chips, toast and peanut butter, and jam and coffee.

We left him in high spirits. He, too, had been more than pleased to have us stay with him. I have since heard that he was killed, cruelly, by the Japs. They captured him as he was carrying out his and the other oilmen's self-appointed task of blasting the wells out of action--almost the last man, civilian or soldier, to stick around Yennan-Yaung! After a final glance at the single-storey, white bungalows of the European quarters, we threaded our way among the thronging Burmese workers and shoppers.

We arrived back by half-eight, after a pleasant drive in the cool morning air, only to find a flurry and a cry. The C.O. was gone already for Zaigon with several of the pilots, Allan had come up in exchange, and there was considerable chatter and speculation as to what was now happening at Mingaladon and Rangoon.

I murmured to Ricky, "Well, son, back to the old bully. Let's go and pick out a good kite from the bunch over there."

And so we did.

CHAPTER VII

PATROL!

WITH Allan and Bob Stout and myself had taken off from Magwe on the morning of March 7, we flew in tight formation for a while. It was a change from the open battle formation, and it expressed our mood zestfully to show our skill.

I saw Allan's face smile at me, and I knew he could feel the blast of my prop on his aileron control, then I myself momentarily glanced right, for there was Bob doing the same to me. We kept like that, like track runners who were also friends out training together, then Bob pulled away and we separated to a shallow vic.

Automatically opening my hood, I found it actually cooler with it shut at our low height. The rubber of my oxygen-mask was crinkling with the heat, so I loosened the strap and let it dangle. Still the sweat suppurated, and as a last resource I loosened my whole helmet although that let in engine noise. Finally I took my hands off the stick, rested my elbows on either side of the cockpit, and sat there relaxed, giving the stick a nudge with my knees every now and then as required.

Placidly we sped along, steadily as one waterdrop down the course of a river, and below us the Prome road was graphed erratically among the seldom-ending stretch of jungle and thick forest.

As we peered above and around on guard against the casual but sudden encounter, I bethought how Magwe had now become the gathering place of the clans. Yesterday afternoon, I had met a dusty saloon out from which had poked "Slug" Elsdon's, Barry Sutton's and Jack Storey's faces, dusty, tired, inquiring. They had just come out of Rangoon, and, to my questioning they had answered calmly enough, as though they had left the office for the week-end. "Oh, Mingaladon, we've just had it! Army pulled out and here we are! Where's the mess, Ken?"

And during a last check of my machine for the morrow, that evening I had seen Wing Co. Carey come sliding and jinking in

to land in his unmistakable fashion, setting his aircraft down gently as snowflakes on a flat roof-top. He had just "had" Mngaladon too!

The outline of Prome's raggle-taggle collection of buildings began to show up and, keeping to the right of the roadway which had swerved back underneath us again, we pin-pointed the newly-made strip, "Park Lane." This looked to me as though it would be seen unmistakably from any height, although it was placed among paddyfields. It stood in a huge irregular square formed by the river and broken lines of trees and spinneys, but the levelling and rolling of the stubbled paddy had been accomplished so thoroughly it lay like a cream stripe on the dusty ochre surroundings.

Awkwardly manipulating a map, I tried to follow Allan's course; and, looking over the area, noticed the activity along the road south of the town where many military vehicles were moving to and fro purposefully.

We slipped lower, and Allan commenced weaving. Somewhere among these fields and hamlets was our new operating strip, Zaigon. Allan mumbled something over the R/T, but I couldn't catch the words. He circled round, and in a widely separated line astern we followed this way and that. I chuckled. Allan couldn't find the place, although he'd landed there before. Bob called up that he could lead us in and did so.

The strip lay alongside a few scattered trees, and when I picked it out I was agreeably surprised to see how it was naturally camouflaged. No plane above a couple of thousand feet would be able to distinguish it—a comforting thought! But the surface—chopped cobblestones, was my first impression. I made a foul landing, coming in too fast and ballooning, and when I did settle my machine she grunted and rattled protestingly. The dust, of course, while the prop was turning even slowly, was bad.

Sgt. Moody had his men out parking us at smooth patches just off the strip itself. We got out of the cockpits, stretched our limbs, and then sprawled inside his ancient Morris—from whence it came, who cared?—to bounce and wobble over a very rough cart track away to a bamboo hut half a mile off by an oasis of trees. We crunched the crankcase every now and then and then went over a paddy wall, and the remarks passed helped to ease the jar.

These were our quarters, the antipode of a home station, but the atmosphere was stimulating. I hitched off my revolver gratefully and lay down on the thin matting by the boys. The C.O. looked up and grinned. "Lo, Ken, welcome to the 'all! 'Lo, Allan; hello, Bob; take a pew, have a snort of tea!"

So we relaxed. One flight were away patrolling Rangoon, and our turn would come after lunch.

It was somehow cooler there under that bamboo roof. The hut had just three flimsy walls with the open side facing east. In it we slept, ate, and philosophised and shot lines. The men did the same in its counterpart twenty yards away.

Over by the strip, on which a large throng of coolies had resumed a patient chipping, the Hurricanes looked incongruous as did the first tractor on a farm. They had an air of disdain, an eagerness to be gone, as perforce a sleek airliner would, landing awhile at an emergency field on some cross-African route. Besides the Hurricanes the coolies squatted placidly on their haunches, chipped away at the earth's crevices for a few moments, and then leisurely looked up from beneath their coned straw hats and wondered at these chunks of metal and fabric being able to fly like the birds. Among the coolies stalked the overseer, distinguishable by his linen jacket above his cotton skirt, quite ineffectively exhorting them to show greater energy.

Then came a hum and then a louder drone as our machines approached and circled us. They landed, the dust rose, and ten minutes later we were all gathered. Someone, after the usual explanatory chatter had quietened, asked, "What about grub? I could roast a pie dog, I'm so hungry!"

The wit who then suggested brightly, "What about some pie-dog pie, then?" was threatened with extermination.

Gleefully we came out of the small storage hut in which had been stowed quite a good stock brought up from Rangoon. I and Sgt. Payne squatted down over the small fire we lit—like townsmen, but so expeditiously—with petrol, and set to frying sausages, chipped potatoes and onions, the latter bought locally. The smell arising from the frying-pan was sheer ecstasy. I like my grub done just so, usually on the burnt side, and we all fed well. After a polite belch or two, someone else, I think it was Bob, handed round cans of peaches and then one of the men yelled, "Char up!"

I visualised Australia as a beneficent sausage factory as I finally inhaled from my cigarette. As our show was not for an hour, we then lay down and had a nap.

The patrol we set out on later that afternoon served to refresh us as well as giving us a job to do. Although we jogged very lazily to our machines, and clambering inside was pleasant as walking into a blast-furnace shop on the hottest day of summer, the motions of taking off and climbing up over the haze until we were high and it was cool on our knees and our cheeks were pink and fresh again, brought us to the alert like getting down to work on Monday morning.

It was strange hovering over Rangoon at 20,000 ft.—a hostile Rangoon! There, like a model contour, a finely-worked wood-cut set on the floor, lay Rangoon and Mingaladon, a white triangle, the glittering pagoda and the equally shimmering lakes, tranquil, their delineations blurred just off focus by the brown film of haze. Yet it was now enemy territory, deserted but for the vanguards and those inhabitants who had not evacuated. The oil smoke was still rising from the docks, but to a lesser degree. If I lifted that roof, that one there by the side of the Silver Grille building, would startled Japs look up and scurry like those insects which frantically hide if you lift a stone?

We circled for half an hour but could pick out nothing on Mingaladon, Johnny Walker, or Highland Queen, and the air was clear of Jap fighters. So we put our noses down and swept up the road back to Zaigon.

By the time we had landed, the aircraft had been refuelled and the covers had been draped over them, the coolies were rising to trudge off home, their earthen bowls and implements looking now almost as familiar to us as the scythe or rake of an English labourer. Many of them passed in file by our huts and lingered curiously a few moments.

There was some kind of sub H.Q. in the village where we were supposed to go for the evening meal. So nine of us in the Morris rumbled along an awful cart-track in the dust-laden trail of Group Captain Singer, who had come to the dispersal during the day. Tommy, driving, was not at all sure of the way, and Ray Prince, myself, John Monk, Allan, all of us, urgently put forward our theories. Eventually we came to the macadamised road, accelerated thankfully down it, and arrived among the

village buildings. Chickens and pie dogs, perambulating idly, scattered from our headlights.

The meal included "Bully-a-la-Burmese" and canned beet-root, but it went down. There was much confusion as men and officers wandered to and fro around the earthen yards and wooden buildings. Departing, we scrounged a double ration of beer, and without wasting time hustled it away in the old Morris. After branching off the macadam, the bottles clinked delightfully as we jolted over each paddy wall.

We were lucky not to lose ourselves, but someone noticed a familiar look about one spinney and there, round its corner, we came upon the huts. The men had lit a campfire which was flaming hospitably, and we edged among them and produced our beer.

"Ahheech!" A grin of Yorkshire shrewdness and appreciation spread across Tonnicliffe's face. We filled mugs and handed them round. One of the best beers I've had!

Thinking on it now, I can perceive it would have been easy for a Jap patrol behind our lines to have picked us off—from outside the ring of heat the men showed in silhouette or presented a flushed face to plain view. But, oblivious, we swallowed our beer slowly, smoked with ineffable content and, that night, Tonnicliffe and I worked out our plan for the New and Better World after the war. A democratic gathering, if ever there was one; and from the Group Captain to the humblest A.C.2 we sat in the circle and watched the flames and talked man to man.

We went to sleep on the bamboo matting on the floor, and I wrapped a discoloured mosquito-net round myself—a gesture. The fire died slowly and later in the night the moon silently came by. Twice I stirred and woke to harken to a pariah dog snarling at its own itches. The second time one of the men swore at it, then there was a yelp and quiet again. Glancing at the palm outlined some yards away, it contrasted with the oak outside my bedroom window at home, of which I had been dreaming.

Before breakfast we were off on a sweep—of eight Hurricanes—down over Rangoon again. We were following up reports of a mixed bunch of Japanese fighters and bombers which had been strafing the Army. They might even have been below us yesterday when we had been up high.

It was clear and cold up, while the countryside was still streaked with channels of mist in the undulations of the land. The sun was not glaring, merely a friendly brilliance, and we savoured the beauty of flying. Alongside, the other machines poised like swifts with wings outstretched, and the red, white, and blue of the roundels shone bravely. I jinked the machine now and then, as a swimmer will sport in a calm sea. Returning, we swept low as before, more alert and keen to catch sight of a Jap. We must have been too early though, and the only activity we observed was the wary movement of army trucks on the road as they halted and gazed at us to make out whether we were friendly.

Someone had rummaged out a tin of bacon and I happily frizzled my rashers as I love 'em, cinder-like. And the eggs were not duck either. One morning tea was on the sweet side, the erk concerned having gaily poured a whole tin of condensed milk into the bucket. The only water I could drink, that which I'd brought in my thermos, was finished. So I smoked a pipe and found the sweetness on my tongue gave flavour like molasses to the tobacco.

Word came through from the Army of another Jap visit—it might have been ourselves—and off we went again, about 10.30. All of us were now particularly watchful on take-off; to be jumped when you are climbing at about 1,000 ft. and have not gathered speed would put your chances of survival at one in a hundred. We flew as far as Rangoon again, back at a different height, but landed still with nothing to report.

After lunch we dozed. It was hot that day. Every day was hot; yes, but that day was very hot. The coolies chipped away at the surface and the men kept cursing the minor troubles caused by it. One example was that the vibration caused many an oxygen pipe to break. Sgt. Moody, however, potted cheerfully up and down in the Morris, and when we drove in it down to the machines for a final sweep the back seat and feet wells were littered with odd spares and tools.

As we left the hut a crowd of coolies had gathered to collect pay. We were bewildered by the amounts they were given, and although their chatter, often conducted in oratorical fashion from a squatting posture, seemed largely to be grumbling, I daresay they had not handled so much hard cash for a long time.

When we took off I had to return. The outboard gun-panel blew off because of a faulty screw and, small as it was, the reduction in the upper surface area compelled me to fly with a stick hard over to one side. Absolutely useless for combat, so I swore gently and slapped the machine down in a mild temper.

The boys were not returning to Zaigon but we were going back to Park Lane, Prome, so I lay under the wing while the men ferreted around for a spare panel. Already we were moving out of Zaigon! Sweltering under the wing, I wondered how long, at this rate, it would be before the Japs were up at Magwe. It seemed evident the Army had not got the forces or equipment to stem this obviously well-planned thrust of the Japs.

I waited until all the men were ready to move out, then took off myself. The Zaigon strip had had it! A pity, I thought, with one glance back before I headed north. Down below were the Morris and trucks throwing up a small series of dust clouds, and trudging away in all directions I could pick out the figures of the coolies. They must have thought us daft, paying them to make a strip and then abandoning it almost immediately. Then I surged down to deck-level and, skimming the trees for the thrill of it went quickly to Park Lane.

That strip deserved its name, for it was as smooth as concrete and there was still the steam roller, which had made so much difference at one end of the runway. But behind me, in my wake as I rolled to a standstill, rose turbulent gusts of dust and bits of straw and stubbly twigs.

I waited by the machine for the boys to return, and they appeared, as I had done, low and in a chase-me-Charlie string. We all helped settle the machines for the night and walked over to the north-west corner where, in a tiny clearing behind the trees, was a mass of trucks.

The air resounded with wisecracks as odd bodies, wrapped perfunctorily in a dirty towel, came back from a bathe in the river. Everybody was cheerful; the Group Captain grinned at us all approvingly, and set to arranging his mosquito-net from one door of his car; we gathered bamboo matting and made ourselves a bed too.

When supper came it was a question of waiting turn for the use of a plate and mug and "irons." Australian sausages

again, but delicious in the cool evening. We lay back on our beds to smoke a cigarette, well content.

There in Promie was the Army H.Q. I think—that day anyhow. The R.A.F. also had a fair staff. Already Ops. had established themselves in a house off the main road, and they were working hard trying to organise some kind of warning system.

After the morning sweep—they were becoming a regular thing and we chuckled, thinking of the dozens of squadrons flying across Channel at home, as we entered them in our log-books: *March 10.* Sweep over Rangoon—we had a chat with the A.L.O. He, of course, was anxious for us to catch the odd flights of Jap fighters that seemed to be wandering at will over no-man's land and our own lines.

We explained the difficulty of the haze. Remembering that not only was there an area, but a volume, to be searched, to catch sight of another plane in that brown ocean of heat and dust was difficult. It perchance depended upon luck, and our luck was at that time obviously pretty poor.

However, he let drop a hint about the Chinese moving down an army to help, which intrigued me for one. The A.V.G., I remembered, always affirmed the Chinese gave them an amazing observer corps warning system, Chinese guerrillas impudently going way behind the Jap lines to sit overlooking aerodromes and to tap out messages concerning impending raids. Without our disadvantage of looking so obviously white, they might be able to do the same for the air forces here in Burma.

We wandered off for lunch, and then I was inoculated against cholera, which was bad in the town. As always, I adopted my method of looking away from the needle and reading a mental newspaper during the job. It works.

Wing Co. Woodhouse took the boys for a "quickie" again in the afternoon, and sent Batchy and myself back to Magwe with a couple of ramshackle Hurricanes.

The pair of us flew off, and half way back to base I thought I'd do a loop. It was so long since I'd done any aerobatics that I pulled the stick back too hard and flicked going upwards. Batchy switched his R/T. on and guffawed at me as he watched me stagger and swoop to rights again. Then we slow-rolled from 10,000 down to the deck, which brought us to Magwe and the red runway.

Flexing my legs enjoyably as I walked slowly to the tent, I observed a new lot of Indian soldiers coming to take guard. It was dusk, and one of the Indians approached me and said something. I looked at him in curiosity, trying to show by expression that I was friendly.

He was handsome and smart, of a Mandalay regiment, and with great good humour he offered me his bowl of food. It was difficult to refuse, yet I did not want to rob him of what looked like a small enough portion. But I had to sip at the soupy mess, which tasted fair enough. Then, with many mutual smiles, I left him and wandered to the billet. Sam, who happened to be driving out from the men's quarters at that moment giving me a lift. That encounter certainly impressed with its implication of what was the spirit of the Indian army in the field, more than that of which I had seen nothing but American film versions.

At dinner Ricky turned up tired and oilstained. "Hi-ya, Gritty, behold the M.T. chief! And, oh boy, has the squadron got some trucks now!"

Sam lifted his face from his food and grinned, but warningly.

"Slush, don't let everybody know how much transport we've got!"

I took a gulp at my tea and asked, "What, have you been stealing again, Ricky?"

"Are you telling me!" he whispered. "Establishment is twenty-four, we've already got thirty-five vehicles—and more to come. All serviceable, too, *we're* not going to lose good trucks to the Japs, no sir!"

"What's all this big hustle on M.T. for anyway?" I asked.

The C.O. grinned (he had returned to Magwe the day previous). "How'd you like to go to China?" he murmured, so that outsiders to the squadron could not overhear.

My eyebrows lifted. "So that's it! You think it will come to that, sir?"

"In the end—yes. At all events it's an idea, and as well to be prepared."

"And when they finally rest the squadron, how's about going back to England *via* Canada, eh?" Ricky exclaimed brightly.

We laughed derisively. "What? Through that dump?"

Hotly he started to bite, and then as quickly silenced himself.

It was then after nine and he, myself, Mike, and Sam retired

to the billet where we found Titus entertaining Tug and Flight Guest to a drink. There was much pleasant chatter, including quite an argument about the British Tommy.

Ricky said, "I think the difficulty is that at home the Tommy is comparatively urban, whereas Canadians, or Americans, are naturally accustomed to going off on trek or camping over huge stretches of wild country. That makes it difficult for the Tommy to cope in the jungle."

"But the Japs are only good because they've been very specially trained. Besides, you can train a Tommy better than any troop in the world," Sam roundly declared.

At that time, of course, we had no Wingate expedition to cite. I lay back on the charpoy and the talk quickened. Then, as we often realised, we knew we weren't getting anywhere and someone started to sing, softly at first. "Down...nash street...we had a merry parrrtic..."

When Shaibah Blues was at its height I rolled over and started to doze, feeling voluptuously tired so that it was an ecstasy to stretch and stretch again until a joint cracked. The last voice I heard was Mike presenting, or being presented by Titus, with the "Croix de Guerre."

"M'sieur...je vous embrace...ta-ra, ta-ra-ra, ta-ra-ra..."

The C.O. led us off the following morning. It was one of those days when all of us, innocently enough, contrived by our actions to delay take-off.

"Now then, jump to it, you're nothing but a pack of old women!" he exclaimed disgustedly. Wisely keeping our mouths shut we trotted at a run to our machines.

At Park Lane we landed to refuel. Following Tex Barriek closely, I came down into a channel of dustcloud and I chopped the throttle at once. The next second, running on front wheels only, I caught a glimpse of Tex's machine and I braked hard. The tail came up, went down, came up...I eased off brake hurriedly, was forced to slam it on again, eased it off...

Tex grinned when we strolled across to one another. "I o'd see you, Gritty, you were coming right up my street. I was git'in' ready to swing off!"

When we were all restarting to go off on the sweep, I found my battery was flat; there were no trolley "acks" either, so that was that. Cursing, I sat down under the wing in enforced

contemplation while the men went to see if there was by any chance a spare available among our meagre equipment at Promc.

Lying there in the shade of the wing, looking at distant coohes, at the pale undersurface and the streaks of oil in the wheel housings, my mind picked on people and things as a spotlight does at a dance.

"Wonder how Farthing's getting on...his wife was upset that night at Catterick after he had gone off in the morning with the men and Sam...Bill must be...forget it, won't help...Why should one religion be so presumptuous—others fundamentally believe in the same thing, one God or supreme force...This must have been the same in France...What a shambles...those people in India...humm, white people get very soft in the East after more than two years...servants arrogant...No, I wouldn't want it, rather have the tussle back home...India must be a nice refuge for our so-called aristocrats...Where the hell's Moody got to...Who'd come to countries where you have to have millions of inoculations...and the insects, uh...I want to drink water when I see it, have snow in winter, and coal fires..."

I opened my eyes. There were some aircraft overhead. Then, thankfully, my ears recognised the familiar note of Merlins in a dive. The sound of the five Hurricanes, sliding down to earth like falling stars, came and went, rolled and reverberated in a majestic scale. For a moment I could not see them, then I picked out first one silvery outline, another, and the remaining three. Five minutes later they were taxiing on the strip, and there was the swirl of dust and stubble straws. Again they had seen nothing. We were all impatient about it—but impotent.

We all had lunch in the open and then Tommy and I returned to Magwe, the men starting by machine but swooping batteries temporarily. On the way back, I looped again, this time cleanly, without a shudder. The three with the C.O. stayed behind for another sweep.

"Talk about spring cleaning," I chuckled to Michael, with whom I drove off after landing, "the number of these sweeps we're doing, we'll polish all the gold off the pagoda at Rangoon by the time we've finished!"

"Pity, in one way," Mike remarked, "wastes engine hours so

quickly... Did you know we're going to have our own squadron mess?"

I shook my head. Apparently Sam had practically engaged to move in to one of the houses overlooking the polo ground. The C.O. was very keen, and we should be transferring soon.

"A good idea!" I was pleased, on the whole, although we were very happy in our bamboo hut. But it would be all to the good; the boys were at least assembled in Magwe, including our new additions, Bailey and Peters, the two South Africans, and Ricky, Slim Lewis, Shorty Miller, Owen, Frank, it was something to stick together in a bunch, helping each other.

As Mike drove from one machine to another—I stayed with him for company—we glanced up at a Blenheim circling aimlessly overhead. Back from a raid? And then dismissed it from our minds, and consequently from our sight and hearing. But at twilight, when that blue-greyiness like a twist-planetary light was slinking in from the East, and we had just decided to return to the billet, Mike slipped the gear to neutral and exclaimed, "Hell! Look at that!..."

Over on the soft wash-line of the horizon, in the direction of the Yennan-Yang road, we saw a mercurial bubble of flame slither along. It stopped abruptly, snuffed out, and there was thrown up a mushroom of black, oily smoke. The wreckage glowed in a final spasm and then up darted two red and one green very lights, a sort of macabre firework display. One could imagine them being fired off gleefully by a malevolent gremlin as he gloated over the wreckage, for that was what it was—the Blenheim we had noticed shortly before circling overhead.

Mike slammed in the gear and we drove fast down the runway on to the road and along. Behind us came an A.V.G. jeep to the rescue too, and after going a mile or so we had to drive off the roadway down into the scrub where sandy cart-tracks were the only means of reaching the scene of the destruction of the human meteorite. At a sanded streamlet bed our large truck was halted irrevocably, and we hopped in alongside the following A.V.G. man. It grew darker, but headlights switched this way and that as we urgently threaded among scrub brush and ploughed field.

Then, in a more open area of cultivation, we first came upon a

piece of engine cowling—and that was about the largest whole fragment of wreckage we could find. Over several hundred square yards that Blenheim was scattered to the equivalent of its original component nuts and rivets. After picking up rounds of ammunition by the score, we quietly got back into the jeep.

"I guess that crate won't fly again!" the A.V.G. man summed up. Whoever had been piloting the machine was obviously now dead; it was dark, too, so we went. Masters of the air we may be, but it is in the sense that a road in the N.W. Frontier of India is kept open by continuous patrolling—relax one hour and there can be death or destruction.

However, after a wearisome search for our abandoned truck, which was somewhere "over there" we knew, we luckily ran across it and made the billet in good time to cleanse ourselves and have dinner.

We were later glad to find out the explanation. In that Blenheim had been one dead pilot, and the observer and gunner had flown the machine back to Magwe. Over the field they had pushed out the body to parachute it down safely, and then had to abandon the machine themselves. A grand effort, the pity being that the parachute of the dead pilot failed to open fully and his remains were lost.

This we discussed while we had a drink together, and then it was forgotten. We went to bed convinced that with a few hundred more planes and some tanks we could chuck the Japs back in Indo-China.

Next morning there was no show for me, so with Bailey and Peters I went foraging. Owing to some of the crews having been flown over to Akyab by air, there was a certain amount of spare kit put in the schoolhouse building. Also, someone had pinched my suitcase from the truck in which Sam had brought our chattels. I was out for blood.

We salvaged some shirts and shorts, which we all badly needed, and then I found my suitcase on the ground in a deserted spot not far from the aerodrome. It only increased our suspicions of the Burmese. It had been slashed open by a knife, but curiously enough the only article stolen from it was a torch I had bought in Karachi. My tins of tobacco, a precious hoard, were untouched, as were my blue poplin shirts, but another small suitcase of clothes had vanished entirely.

We called at dispersal tent and found some of the boys setting off to strafe a Jap sectional H.Q. Young Warburton was highly excited at the prospect.

Slim Lewis had just been taking off on an air test and we watched him roll with increasing speed along the runway. He had just got his wheels tucked up and we heard a splutter and misfire. I think it is almost as unnerving for a pilot on the ground to hear an engine cutting as it is for the man in the machine himself—although Slim didn't agree. However, he pancaked it skilfully on a clear patch of ground and escaped with minor bruises.

I remarked to Mike, "The first time we've had an engine cut like that. Not a bad record!"

He agreed. "No, I must say I've expected it before now considering all this dust we work in!" Then, wearily slipping in his gear, he drew off to assess the damage. The boys took off on their strafe.

During the afternoon I accompanied Sam on an errand of mercy. In the C.O.'s car we drove fast up the road to Yeman-Yaung, our purpose to inquire at the hospital there how two of our men were progressing. The two fellows had had an accident on a journey for petrol and had been at the hospital now several days. Sam left me outside while he investigated, and I sat idly watching the tongas, the occasional truck, passers-by, and a slow, patrolling policeman. It was hot on my arm, resting on the door window-ledge, and I opened the door to let in some air, for I was beginning to sweat after the cool breeze of the drive.

Out of that hospital there then emerged as pretty a picture of a Burmese lady as I ever saw during the campaign. She wore a pink silk skirt, folded over gracefully, a white blouse under which one could perceive the brassiere, and all her person radiated crisp cleanliness. Her gleaming black hair was surmounted by a black "topper" of feminine proportions, and she held a gay parasol. Her smooth, high-cheekboned face was composed but vivacious, and she went stepping daintily over the road with an interested glance in my direction, as though she had remarked to herself, "A stranger, poor soul! I do hope he can get a cup of tea for himself!" That was the traditional fashion, and very nice too, I thought. I have never seen another woman

since, even among the Burmese evacuated from their homeland to India, who could compare.

Sam reappeared, grunted that the lads were doing all right, and then we called at the British Club and had our hair cut. It was strange feeling mechanical, civilised clippers again!

Back at the mess that evening the C.O. was in jovial mood, and we gathered round him to join in a drink with the A.V.G. who had dropped in. We stood there and frankly eyed one another, and in our association felt the pride of manhood—like members of friendly bandit gangs meeting.

Ricky, myself, and Snooks Everard decided eventually to slip off to bed and we left quietly. The latter, a chubby-faced Canadian from a place called Timmins, tried to explain to me why other Canadians became so derisive when his home town was mentioned. Ricky wouldn't bite, however, for the night was cool, a breeze gently puffed at our cheeks like a playful lover and the thick dust padded our footsteps. I slept heavily.

Awake early, I took my time washing and voluptuously lathered my arms outside in the sun like a cat cleaning itself. It was plain readiness for us that morning, and after one alarm, which involved no more than several excited telephone conversations, we were eventually relieved for lunch. I used Stinker's car, a nice little Humber coupé which we had "acquired."

There were women and children, anxiously standing alongside a transport plane as we drove along. Many of the Europeans were being evacuated by air and every day would see a carload come down the road from Mandalay, with perhaps a pram strapped on the luggage-grid. The pram, and many other belongings equally precious, never got farther than the large house adjacent the aerodrome in which these refugees lodged for the night.

I and Allan MacDou', in consequence, missed afternoon readiness, because when we came back to the car after lunch an irate Wing Co. pounced on me. I forget his name, but—it was his car! So we walked back to the tent.

There a story was being related that a wireless message from the Japs to their H.Q. way East had been intercepted by our Signals: "Enemy planes endeavouring to strafe X...but Sgt. Kibitsui took off and intercepted."

"Well," young Warble laughed, "we never saw any Jap

plane, and we certainly strafed the Jap position all right—I came back with a couple of bullet-holes in my wings!”

Sgt. Kibitsui after that became a legendary figure. After each successful move on the part of the Japs we would promote him; or if they suffered loss we would demote him. He became one of our personal gremlins. If an aircraft went U/S. for no simple reason, someone would wisecrack, “Think we’ll commission old Kibitsui...he’s done a good job on my kite to-day!” Once we decided to report him to the Duty Pilot, Tokyo, for not having advised us of some cloud which appeared over the eastern ranges.

At dinner that night I spill the salt. Someone muttered, “Imu, Friday the thirteenth!”

I told myself I wasn’t superstitious, but there was a doubt in my mind. Lighting three off a match worried some, not myself and others, and as a squadron we were singularly free of those fads. Yet at the end of the course I surreptitiously picked up a few grains of salt in my right fingers and threw them over my shoulder. Having a smoke outside, I was cheered by the sight of a shooting star, and I wished hard.

Not that I can recall very many instances of this sort of thing even among the innumerable squadron types I’ve come across. One instance I can call to mind this moment is of Wing Co, Carey who never flies without a torn, rainbow-coloured flimsy scarf, a woman’s material. Three pilots, himself, Chessar Hull whom many old-time R.A.F. will remember as a great flier, and one other man have the same scarf. The other two are killed now!

And then some pilots will not fly in certain letters. Aircraft A was always a packet of gremlins and troubles; but K, my favourite, was infallible by reputation among most squadrons. Some C.O.s wouldn’t have a J in the squadron even if it cost them a month’s pay. J is a jinx, and kills off good pilots.

That incident with the salt started a discussion. I noticed most of the boys were ready to affirm their scorn and disregard. Not that I don’t believe ‘em...

The ensuing two days were spent on readiness or on patrol, while in the evenings, now we were all together again, we would talk and argue of war and peace and every subject in between. We were glad to go off on patrol or to sneak an air test, for the readiness was binding. There was a constant coming and going

and spinning up of dust around our tent, and besides the Japs seemed to be having another of their quiet periods.

On which the C.O. commented, "As usual they're sitting on their swords and fishing-rods over there in Indo-China, hatching up some mischief for the next session!"

His reference to the fishing-rods concerned the curious discovery we had made among the wrecks of the Japanese bombers shot down; tucked among the guns and corpses were those piscatorial incongruities. One wag suggested that the Japs felt so superior being "sons of the Emperor," that their operational trips were mere pastime and the fishing was what they really wanted Burma for.

On Saturday we went down to Tharawaddy, but in the haze, which seemed to be thickening daily to a climatical opacity, we failed to locate the outlines of any tumbling Jap fighters.

That evening we found the men and some of the pilots had rigged up a shower, and it was a delight we savoured to the full. Jack Gibson and I wrestled in the nude, wet and slippery, and we floundered about, giggling and gasping, as if we were two unskilled skaters holding on to each other for balance. Drying myself and slipping on clothes, I felt that healthy glow which cannot easily be arrived at in tropical climes; almost the only alternative to sweatiness is a short-lived dryness, requiring lots of talcum powder.

As we were hanging about the tent the next day, awaiting the arrival of Wing Co. Carey, who was to lead us on a sweep over Toungoo for the benefit of the Chinese Army operating towards there, I think it was Tex Barriek who remarked on my swearing, "Aw, now, Gritty, I'll tell your Mom. Don't you know it's the Sabbath?"

We looked at each other in mild surprise. Jack chuckled, "Hell, Tex, I haven't known the day over since we've bin here!"

That was true enough for us all; we took our day of rest when circumstances permitted. And someone said, "It'll seem an easy life after the war, not workin' on Saturdays and Sundays!"

Nobody considered the religious aspect because religion did not enter the issue. I think myself that a man's belief is nohow weakened because he doesn't punch the clock of a Sunday morning. His conscience, his own particular instinct of what is good

or bad—and a man's code is not fundamentally so very different from his neighbour's when you strip away trivialities magnified by prejudice—will induce him naturally to commune with the Maker, or his own picture of the Thing. Force, Intelligence, call it what you like, behind us.

In the middle of our speculation the Wing Co. arrived and shortly afterwards we took off. Going south-east as we did, and looking down over the strip at Toungoo and at the paddy around it and ranges east, was like operating from Mingaladon again. The haze was now risen in its level like a muddied, flooding river. At 10,000 ft. we were still curving and jinking warily in its aggravating discoloration. I was acting as No. 2 to the leader and he certainly gave me an example of weaving. It was comforting to realise how difficult a skilled pilot can make the task of any jumping enemy fighter.

There was no incident. Below us, the fields and villages lay serene and gave no sign of the barbarous game of hide-and-seek being played out among their ditches and hutments. However, on the return we observed a line of forest fires which, followed, would have led any aircraft to Magwe. The line was too obvious not to have some hostile significance, but what could our outnumbered troops do about it? Searching for such fires in that jungle would have been useless. So we forgot it, delighted to encounter some scattered cumulus, the picturesque heralds of the ubiquitous mass of monsoon cloud which a month or so later would spread over Southern Burma. We tucked together and flew through the cumulus, enjoying the bouncing about inside the thick vapour and the juggling of stick required to keep wing tip to wing tip. You don't emerge from such clouds, as from others such as stratus where there is first a sensation of light like sun through curtains, but you pop out—Chunnnff! Smooth-flying and in the sunlight again.

Once more we heard W/T. being rapped out. There was no doubt that the Japs had their spies watching our movements by air!

After Ops. at dusk had finally telephoned our release from readiness, we found we had to make our way to the new billet—Sam had at last scrounged the house, and we had our own squadron mess. Sam met us as, tired and dusty, ready for a wash and food and drink, we clumped in, and he beamed as

he asked, "Well, how do you like it?" He obviously thought it was the fairy's black gossamer panties!

As we set out our camp-beds, rummaged among our kits and scattered our personal belongings such as toothbrushes, tins of tobacco, mirrors, on convenient ledges, we grinned back that it was O.K., and was there any beer?

"The C.O. will be pleased, too," someone said.

There was a hell of a clatter and splashing of water as we shared the few bathrooms and shaved over one another's shoulders. That house rang with laughter again, as no doubt it had done when the Burmese family who had occupied it weeks before had been carrying on their normal life, untroubled by thoughts of foreigners waging war in their backyard.

Downstairs in the lounge, Sam had got together some chairs, a battered settee, a table, and on a sideboard which confronted you as soon as you entered were a few bottles—gin, Scotch, and cordials plus a chatti of water. Behind, stood the squadron crest.

Later, going off for dinner at the wing mess, Ricky and I grinned slyly at the collection of vehicles gathered round our own house.

"Might think we had a monopoly, son," I remarked.

Ricky retorted with pride, "Huh, you ain't seen nothin' yet, Pop, you wait until my gangsters have finished scrounging!"

March 16 provided us with a scramble to enliven readiness and we shot up at 15,000 with great anticipation. However, although some Japs had come within our sector, we did not encounter them, and after hovering over base for half an hour Ops. brought us back again. From then until dusk it was a case of drinking char, and more char, and every now and then, languidly in the heat, rising to inquire if there was a job. More weariness than constant patrolling. Oh, the way one wakes up, having sweated coldly in a doze, when the telephone rings!

The C.O., who had been taking a deserved two days' off up at the hill station at Maymo, above Mandalay, brought back a blonde! We laughed incredulously when Sam, chuckling, told us. It was all in order, though it made a good joke. He had been sent off for the rest by Group Captain Seton Broughall who had jokingly enjoined him, "And don't forget to bring back a blonde, Bunny!" So the C.O. brought one back!

She was one of the civilians evacuating from Burma, and for the C.O. and the boys with him in the car to push up and give her a lift to the aerodrome had been a matter of courtesy. Her small boy was thrilled to see the aeroplanes and pilots. He didn't realise what was going on!

Having a snort together in the mess that same evening, the C.O. told me I was to go with Allan and Neville Brooks up to Maymo on the morrow. He wanted all the pilots, while the Japs were quiet, to have a couple of days up in the cool hills. I was very pleased, and so was Mike. We had been going at it reasonably hard, I suppose, what with the long hours of readiness and the patrolling. Anyhow, I never refuse leave when it's offered to me! I went to fight my way to the bathroom and to pack some clothes.

CHAPTER VIII

STRAWBERRIES AND CREAM!

SAM put his head round the doorway of the veranda constituting our bedroom and grinned, "What—not away yet, Ken?"

Looking dispassionately at Mike, I said, "If this squadron Heath-Robinson officer would pull his bloody finger out..."

"Not at all, Ken, any moment now...just throwing a few things together—"

"Just as if you were servicing our Hurricanes, eh?" I interrupted rudely.

"—and we're off," he carried on quite happily. "In fact, I'm with you now..." He continued his pottering, refusing to be hurried on this day, of all days. What was two days' leave for but to potter?

"You may be with us in the flesh, but in the spirit, Mike, you've had it!" I lit a cigarette.

Allan came in silently, in his crepe-soled half-boots, and looked at Mike then at me without a word. We watched Mike for five minutes, he glancing at us occasionally and grinning; then as he closed his suitcase we seized it and hustled him downstairs to the car.

We were off!

Allan suddenly sniggered. He looked slyly at me, then, coming out of the drive, he turned the car right instead of left. With a half-ashamed smirk he remarked casually, "Oh... better fill up with petrol and oil, I guess!"

I leaned back, thrusting my hands in my pockets, and asked of the roof, "Wonder if these guys have had breakfast?"

Mike beamed maliciously and pointed out, "Of course, if I'd known you had to fill up, I could have been cutting some sandwiches...all right, all right. Allan, drive on..." loftily and infuriatingly, "musn't upset ourselves over trivialities."

We all burst out laughing.

We did eventually stop wasting time, and after picking up Neville Brooks at the dispersal tent, Allan sent the car rushing smoothly along the road to Yennan-Yaung, the air whistling in through the windows to help keep us cool.

On our way the knowledge that we were free, our own masters just as on a peace-time week-end, came as a revelation. What had been our surprise the previous day, on readiness, when Tex had reminded us of Sunday? Now with no telephone by our side all day and every day suddenly to ring and raise our hackles, we realised the tension of all that sitting around in the dust and heat and then patrolling, patrolling again, and more sitting; and among it the sudden skirmishing dog-fight and the scrambling from sweaty heat to too cool a comfort above.

I leaned my head back so that it jogged every now and then as Allan rode the car over an inescapable rut, and the mere fact of letting it loll on the fabric and stretching my legs so that I could feel a luxurious ache in my joints and muscles was as good as a farmer taking off his boots of an evening. Now we could roll up our sleeves all day and wear shorts without fear; there was no need to be ready to run to your kite and to keep your limbs covered because, up high, mixing it, a stray incendiary might flame up your cockpit and burn your flesh so that afterwards to move would be like trying to walk in a suit of rusted, verdigrised armour. That was one incubus banished from the mood of our delight.

In the midst of a campaign, two days' leave is enough, two weeks too much. After the latter, ease permeates a man's being; resigned, his resolves and reactions, like a jigsaw of many pieces, cannot be reformed into the mien of a complete fighter in a day

—on that first patrol, during a small strafe! That is fighting, one builds up the right outlook, oh! so patiently, by experience, turbing the stream of fears into currents of offensive belligerence, then presto! Twelve days of refined food, baths, clean clothes, and you like civilisation, subconsciously maybe, too much! A rider—after two months you yearn for ops. again! That I know, writing this in a comfortable cantonment bungalow in India, a bearer at hand even to stir the sugar in my coffee if I want.

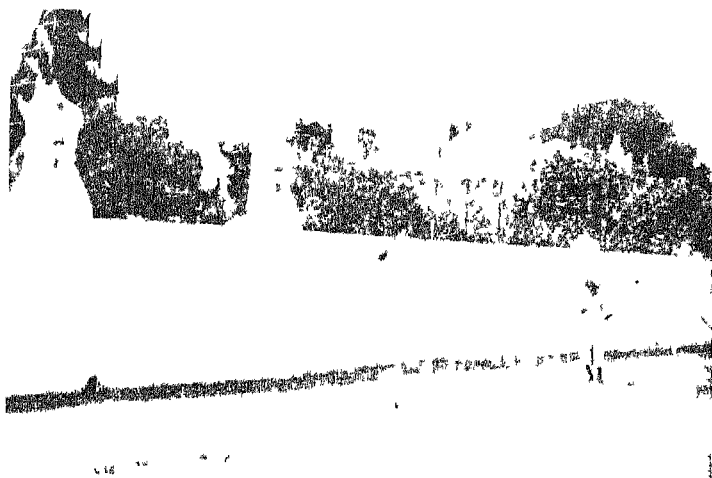
However...Our sole anxiety that day was whether the herds of cattle Allan constantly drove madly at without slowing down would lumber off to the side of the road. Although he didn't deserve it, they fortunately did each time. He noticed my foot stamping down on an imaginary brake and chuckled, "Getting nervous, Ken; surely you trust my driving?"

Coldly I answered, "You may be able to land a Hurricane at a hundred miles an hour, but if you want to park us on the back-side of a cow you'll have to ease up...cows don't move that fast!"

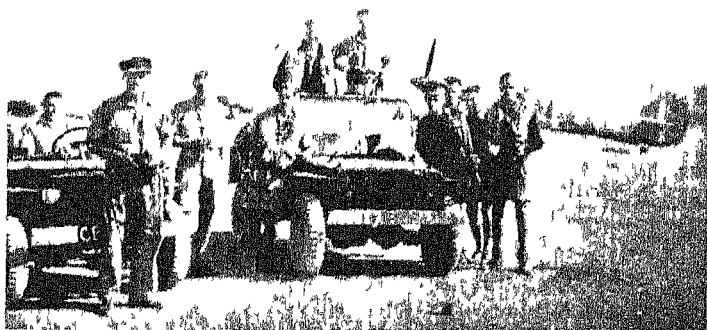
We passed through the ford of the dried-up river, on the bed of which the locals had laid scrub branches and sticks and leaves to form some sort of solid matting over the soft sand, and came into sight of the derricks of the oil town. Our first objective. Threading our way among the tongas and thronging workers, we came on the other side of the town to another ford, this time having to chug through water up to the running-boards, and then we accelerated away down the long, straight highway heading north.

The country here flattened again, sometimes trees and hedges lined the roadside, but more often than not a rutted earth sidewalk led direct on to the cultivated fields. Occasionally would be perched in the midst of the great, curving leaves of the palm trees a Burmese busily engaged in some mysterious task. The only clue we saw was that on some palm trees, suspended at the top of the smooth, grey-white trunk, were small bowls. I think it was some kind of juice the Burmese were collecting, from which to make rather a potent drink.

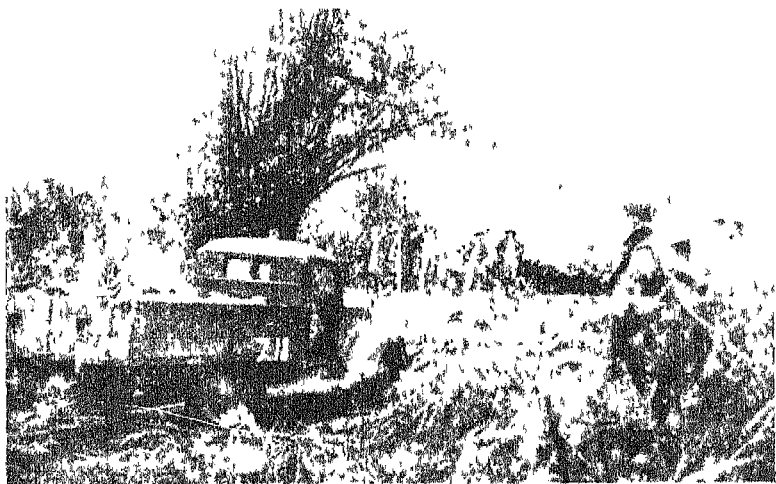
Rarely did we overtake any other vehicle, but still here was the same choking, blinding dust flung up. The sun now beat down from directly overhead with implacable continuity and



Temple at Magwe.



At Mingaladon, Rangoon (L. to R.) Ken Wheatley, "Bush" Cotton, Allan Carvell, the C O ("Bunny" Stone), Browne Jack Gibson, Tommy, Wisrod "Tex" Barnick, Fuggy.



The Boys "walking" out from Laying to Myitkyina.



"Snooks" Everard looks up after the raid. Magaa burns beyond.

the air rushing inside the car was hardly cooling. We smoked and talked, smoked again until we were tired of smoking but still, by habit, lit another cigarette, as one always does on a long journey. The while Allan imperturbably held the car at a steady sixty, sixty-five miles an hour.

After the interminable straight road of which the few curves had been bent straights, there came a fork at last. Our route took us right, debouching from two series of small humps—hardly hills—which lay left and right.

The road, although it retained a good surface, narrowed to a track and the car had to swing round this curve and that. At intervals we would come upon a small ravine, not discernible looking horizonwards, where the road would temporarily degenerate to a mere rutted way, wind down and across a ford and then circle up to the smooth-surfaced level track again. At some of these fords there were Burmese, washing their clothes, languidly scraping the track smooth or building up the ascents with stones. They stared openly as Allan drove the car slowly past.

Eventually this country again became covered with scrub and sandy earth and parched grass, healed itself of ravines and became an orthodox plain, while the road remetalled itself. From the country folk at one of the fords we had bought bananas—God knows where they were grown in that arid area—which had awakened our appetite, so that Allan slipped the clutch and let the car coast to the shade of one of the roadside palms.

At a standstill, I found my cheeks burned as if I'd been out on a winter's day and had come into the circle by a roasting fire. We all started to sweat at once as we rummaged for thermos flasks and packets of sandwiches, and we found it better to sit on the earth underneath the tree.

Chewing some tasty, moist tomato sandwiches, I remarked, somewhat indistinctly, "Bet there's a Blenheim right now, running up and blowing dust all over the boys!"

Allan chuckled, he's got that type of mind, too, but Mike said, "You bastard, Ken...and they've run out of water as well, eh?"

Neville stretched his well-built frame and concentrated on the sandwiches. "Um, mmm, damn good!" (He has since, deservedly, been commissioned.)

Getting back into the car with reasonable promptitude, for we had still a long journey ahead of us, we paused to light up cigarettes and I took the wheel for a period.

"Nice to eat, isn't it; gives you an appetite for a cigarette again...tut, tut, I really must cut it down!" Allan mused. However, to this day I have never known him smoke less than fifty between awakening and slipping back to bed at night.

We came to Meiktila, which I was to revisit but under different, unusual circumstances. The road led us over a river, and we stopped a moment while I photographed the temple standing midstream, thirty yards down the bridge. There were three minute islands on which stood the shrines, the middle pagoda being gold covered and also decorated in vivid colours, while the other two were the traditional white. Alongside one of the latter was a small building, like a bandstand, presumably for the worshippers' convenience.

We now branched left after passing through the town, whose wooden buildings were earthy in colour like a farmer's barns and sheds. The road ran by the Irrawaddy for mile after mile and, naturally enough, with water available, the fields were greener than heretofore and there was every evidence of intensive cultivation, crops of all kinds beside the ubiquitous paddy and corn. Traffic natural to the denser population began appearing, and Allan started to complain about the way I rushed past the meandering bullock-carts. He had a nerve! There were numerous trees and spinneys which also broke up the former monotony of flat scrub and ploughed field; so we sat up more, chatted and took an interest in the passing scene, despite our growing bottom weariness.

Finally Mandalay came within sight.

"I'm glad I'm going to see Mandalay," Michael remarked eagerly, "it always sounds so romantic and Far-East like."

I softly hummed some tune called "Moon over Burma," and we all laughed in self derision. Neville opined that Mandalay would probably have the mangiest, most repulsive pie-dogs in Burma. We asked Mike if he was sure it was the glamour of the East he wanted, and not Dorothy Lamour's sarong?

"Yes, yea, maybe, Ken," Mike grinned unperturbed; "but still...Mandalay does roll off one's tongue so smoothly. Maybe it will live up to its name?"

It didn't!

There was garbage strewn on the pavements; its inhabitants looked as if they wanted a wash, and the stucco of the buildings in the main streets was more often than not peeling in a porriginous dinginess. We bought one or two items there, and then drove out of town quickly.

But its pagodas, against the declining sun, were picturesque; and there were hundreds of them, small, large, magnificent. Unkept some of them might have been, but there was an impressive, startling effect of flamboyant colouring and lettering, and sculpturing that was strange and mysterious. I was fascinated by the carved animal, having the appearance of a savage hound, that at each corner of a pagoda sat watchfully on its haunches, its teeth bared menacingly. They belied my impression that that religion of the Burmese was something concerned with a tenuous, calm spiritual life.

Now we were on the last stage of the journey, and after riding by a canal, along a road shaded refreshingly by many trees, we started the ascent to Maymo. The road was hacked painstakingly in the mountainsides, and to make the grade, as we left the lower, gentler slopes, it writhed and switched back on itself a hundred times and more. Now a sparse forest lined the slopes, and we noticed gratefully the air was become cooler. Ever so often we would have to halt suddenly as a truck driven by a casual Burmese mechanic came coasting laphazardly round the sudden bends.

"Wonder what these hill stations *are* like? I've never been to one before!" I asked.

In the dusk, as we finally breasted the heights and drove on a level about 3,000-4,000 ft. on high, we found the country displayed an English landscape, say Middlesex or Bedfordshire, after a heat wave had faded their colours somewhat.

"This is an Army cantonment, isn't it?" Neville queried. None of us knew what such a thing was though. In our rush to Rangoon by air our sightseeing had been confined mostly to hotel gardens or aerodrome vistas. We visualised something like a row of barracks, perhaps a few houses and grounds for married soldiers, certainly nothing to compare with the neatly laid out trees and gardens and club, golf and sports grounds, that do actually constitute these cantonments in Burma and India.

Searching for the flats the C.O. had directed us to was like trying to find a friend's house among the roads of a residential place outside London. We came upon gates with nameplates, leading *via* well-kept drives to spacious houses, brick and half-timbered. It began to darken. At last we came upon the right drive, and Allan thankfully swung the car up the gravel.

We were confronted by four large, two-storeyed buildings standing at the corners of a square in grounds of lawns and flower-beds, and small drives. In the centre was another building, which we found to contain the dining-hall, lounge, and offices. The four buildings housed the flats which one could rent, furnished, for any period—it was for visiting officers as well as civilians—and after we had inquired at the office, a bearer was sent with us to instal us in our rooms. An elderly Englishman had greeted us quietly at the office, the sort of gentleman who comes slowly and opens the door, stained glass, of an old-fashioned house at which you have by chance called. He seemed out of place, he should have been back at home, ensconced in front of a fire, behind a Victorian weathered façade in some decaying suburb—not, repeat not, in Burma!

We looked blank when we were asked where was our bed-roll? It dawned on us that out East we were expected to travel with sheets, blankets, and a complete furnishing.

"Bearers obviously don't think we're pukka sahibs now!" I grinned.

"Oh, puking obscenity," grunted the others. "where's the mucking bath and let's have some grub!"

The white-clothed servants came back soon enough, however, with blankets and the rest, and served us well. That was the first time I realised what the life of a European out East might be like. For the equivalent of about £2, 10s. per month, they wait on you, on your every wish, from *chota hazri* at half-seven in the morning until a dinner-party at night, lingering after twelve maybe. On that wage, what is more, they feed not only themselves, a wife and three children, but often a grandmother and an odd uncle or nephew thrown in. They were Indians, probably Bengalis.

There came a splashing and a puffing from the bathroom. The sweeper filled the bath again with hot water, and Neville jumped in with delight.

"Ouch!" He jumped out as quickly again, and we grinned. He'd almost scalded his feet. We were all at once not tired, and we changed into blue uniform for the first time since we had discarded it aboard the *Durban Castle* in convoy at mid-Atlantic.

That bath, for each of us, was a notable cleansing, a throwing-off of a mantle of dust and grime we had worn perpetually throughout the last month or so. Up here was no dust, even the people seemed cleaner in appearance. We inspected each other contentedly, everyone smart and prinked to perfection, then strolled over for dinner. Dinner is "kana," and I mention the fact just to show I did pick up a few words of the language!

The dining-room was spacious, and the ceiling high with beams across its plaster. There were half-alcoves, and at one end, near which were a table and magazines, easy chairs, a blazing log-fire was housed in a large brick fireplace. Sitting down quietly at the meal, at which the service was deft and silent, the servants being barefooted, we happily went through the whole menu without a gasp.

There was an excellent soup, rolls, butter that was not running to a greasy mess, fish and anchovy sauce, a chicken of firm, tasty flesh like an English bird, not the scrawny rubber fowl killed by the million in India, and chocolate cream meringues to conclude. We looked at each other at the finish and burst out laughing.

"I don't believe it," I said solemnly. "Here, Neville, have another meringue!" He'd already had about four!

We smoked, talked quietly among ourselves, and then, finishing our second cup of coffee, went back to sleep.

The other diners had taken little notice of us. There were two elderly gentlemen in smart English tweeds, an old and a young woman together at table not far from us, and a mixed foursome who did once or twice raise their voices. It was just like an English hotel out-of-season, everyone avoiding each other's glance. What nostalgia—I wanted to dress the bearers in shabby dinner-jackets!

Maymo is now a Jap Army H.Q.! I wonder if they have changed the atmosphere of that particular establishment? However, delighting in the feel of blankets over my shoulders, I turned on my stomach and in an instant was asleep.

I think, looking back now, those two days have been the most pleasant of any of the leaves I have had out East. For us all, the comfort was naturally a pleasant relief—tinmed sausages to fresh bacon, bully and char to steak and coffee, matting on the earth and bamboo huts to proper beds and civilised rooms.

At some time I became sleepily aware that the sun was shining gaily in at my window, and I heard a soft voice murmuring, "Sahib...sahib, chota hazri! Sahib..." And there by my bedside had appeared a small pot of tea, toast, and a couple of bananas.

We called out to each other lazily, Mike keeping his eyes shut and merely rolling over in luxurious abandonment. Eventually we dressed and shaved and walked over to the dining-room again. The meal was as good, and we again appreciated the mere fact of eating off white tablecloths.

Afterwards, strolling along the country lanes, smoking and chatting, our first impression of the country as we had arrived was confirmed. There were grass verges and ditches as at home, the houses, spacious, built of weathered brick and situated in well-cultivated gardens, could have been those of comfortable middle-class families living in out Middlesex. The few dogs we came across were all obviously cared for, and had a home, not a dust heap, to return to after their peregrinations.

Going to the clubhouse, rather like a golf clubhouse at home, we passed a row of bungalows, and saw one or two women. We grinned. They were white and might well have been housewives glancing curiously outside while in the midst of the morning's tasks. The dwellings looked out upon a golf course, the greens freshly-watered and bright, the fairways smooth, well kept. In the distance the slim, grey-skirted figure of another woman was walking and playing, accompanied by a small caddie.

"It's a tough war, Ken," Michael exclaimed. "Let's have some more!"

Our strolling brought us, after looking in at the club, to the bazaar, and I lingered in a Chinese silk shop, fascinated by a green house-coat. The delicate stitching and shading of the material impressed me. Next day I did actually buy it, but that morning I hesitated over the price. A matron who was also in

buying, with a friendly smile advised me not to pay what was asked but to bargain with the Chinaman.

Opposite this shop was a Burmese temple, whitewashed and resplendent in the sun. The pagoda had many dogs protecting its tier on tier, and then from the topmost tier rose, by ring upon ring of stone, to a surmounting metal pinnacle of intricate workmanship shaped like the handle, guard, and striking piece of a lance. The buildings at the gateway and around were also pagoda type, narrowing to a point in a series of ascending roofs of shadow fall, each roof being smaller than the one it rested on.

However, not even one of the seven wonders could have delayed us for lunch. The change of air, which seemed not to be humid, was giving us gluttonous appetites.

Our anxiety to return to the flats and not to miss even the skimpiest *hors d'œuvre* was quite justified, for they served, of all things—strawberries and cream! I golluped a whole plateful, and I have the unsocial and delectable habit of mashing my strawberries up with the cream into one tongue-moistering, bloodshot mass. Then I looked up and caught Mike's eye.

"Very tasty. I like that sample!" I beamed approvingly. "Let's have some now, shall we?"

Mike, and the rest, spluttered. He fortunately caught what he blew out on his spoon, while Allan leaned back and laughed, belly and all. So we all followed my suggestion—and had some!

Coffee had been served, and we were lighting cigarettes when I remembered, "My Old Man always used to tell me of how, during the last war, they were floating down some French village and they suddenly came upon a shop with lots and lots of pastries in the window. They took one look, then dived in. They sat down almost without a word and ate the whole lot...between the three of them!"

Allan inhaled slowly, then commented, "Well, you're not letting the family down, I should imagine, from the way you've been scoffing the grub here. But it is good, isn't it?" he concluded thoughtfully.

A pleasant lady of middle age, who we found had been enjoying watching us eat, made a friendly remark as we sat around. We joined conversation and it culminated in her guiding us to the swimming pool. *En route*, we drove through meadows and

sparsely-wooded fields like an English park or estate. The pool had lovely surroundings—a grove of trees at the north and shaded bamboo huts for changing, while a shout would bring a bearer from whom one could order tea, buttered toast, cakes.

We plunged in and sported vigorously, eventually coming out to lie in the sun. There was no waiting for that cloud to pass away; down came the heat to complete the sybaritic ministrations of the place and all its amenities.

We naturally wanted to visit the club, and, after changing, arrived there for that pleasant interval—that hour before the sun is downed in the bowl of night.

The status of "the club" in an Eastern white community is in one way similar to that of the village pub, except that you have only one social strata—the whites as compared with the indigenous people. We sipped our drinks quietly and just watched. This way of life was new to us.

There were a number of women there, mostly young and probably the wives or fiancées of men fighting down south, and including, of course, a number of the wives of civilians, the engineers, heads of merchant firms and the like. My impression, and it holds to this day, was that they were conscious of being women, and white! Frankly, their bodies were—and are—at a premium in tropical countries. Women are not required to lift a finger about the house, and they have all day to make themselves sleek by exercise, good food, a nap in the afternoon—as a result of which they tend to fatten in the rump earlier than women at home.

I don't blame them for liking the life and abjuring the monotony of housework which would impinge upon their lot at home, but uneasily one feels, after having been out least a couple of years, that there is something fundamentally amiss. Few of them appreciate the privilege of living as they do in a stimulating, interesting foreign country; their brains become bemused by slavish male attention, gin, and "Oh, ayah, don't forget to put John to bed early," or, "Tennis, darling, of course, just a set; then we'll have some of those lovely cream cakes at Straboli's, eh!"

Not that we minded. We hadn't come to sneer at softness or sniff a moral nose; and moral noses usually drip anyway. No, it was a pleasure to sit among feminine company, even several

tables away. We slowly absorbed gin and more gin, and so became more and more garrulous ourselves.

Mike suddenly turned to me and remarked. 'Can't stand this, Ken, let's go into the bar!'

Half-guessing what he implied, I asked. "O.K., but what's the trouble?" Allan was chuckling with a dirty laugh—just like a drain.

"Well, it's like this, Ken. It's so nice to see a woman in evening dress, bare shoulders, hair, cheeks——"

"Easy, son, easy!"

"—that I'm quite sure I shall barge over in a moment to one of these wenches and ask, 'Do you mind if I just sit and talk to you; please don't be offended, it's just that I'd like to talk to a woman for a change'...and then I should have to put up a black again, one of those Osler blacks, d'you see!"

Neville gurgled into his glass. "Have another gin?"

Mike agreed gravely; but we all rose and strolled off to the bar, at which was a packed gathering of Army officers. It was like a city pub at one o'clock of a week-day, and we soon got into conversation with a couple of them. They were interested to hear from us what the R.A.F. was doing, and some of them gave us first-hand accounts of the land fighting.

Prior to his Army experience, one of them had been opening up a small oilfield south-west of Yennan-Yaung. Now, all the money he had saved and invested in it, and all the labour he and his brother had expended over the past ten years, was obviously going to naught. What money he had in the bank was transferred to India for the use of his wife. He was quite cheerful though, and eventually insisted on taking us round to Angelo's restaurant for dinner.

There the food was excellent, but drinks expensive. The restaurant was thriving on the custom of the young officers bringing out to dinner such female company as they could acquire during their short leaves. Allan and Neville, by the way, had become involved in another party, so as table there was our host, Mike, myself, a friend of the host's, and the friend's popsie. The latter was so blatantly enamoured of her escort she was full of tenderness to all the world, and agreed with anything we said. Most irritating, for our host, Mike, and myself had quite an animated discussion.

Having settled that the only thing to do after the war was first to make the Empire a strong economic unit, we then switched to our new allies the Russians. As our host could not stomach their having previously attacked Finland; as I, with corresponding vehemence, declared that we had been at fault, or lackadaisical, in not having concluded a mutual aid pact with her in '39; and as Mike, having been in the profession, kept pointing out the virility of the Russian theatre—this subject lasted well into the liqueur stages.

The loving couple left us, and we hardly noticed them go—except our host who cursed at having to pay for their dinners as well. "Damn paying for that bitch," he muttered, "if I was taking her out, it'd be different—but then," turning back to me, "What are we going to do after the war, old boy? Oil wells will be ruined, I'll have to have some help to get going once more—and will the money be available?"

"One very definite thing I've noticed," I pronounced in recondite authority—we were now drinking cherry brandy—contriving a pregnant pause, "...is that a hell of a lot of chaps in the services are going to move out to South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Canada, after this war!"

"And why not? Just what the Dominions want, just what we want here in the East, fellows with some savvy who are prepared to work——"

"Which they didn't get in the past!"

So it went on. It was not so serious really, quite a lot of noise. There was more, the subconscious knowledge that we could talk our hind legs off, and then sleep until mid-day to-morrow if we wished. Between finishing that cherry brandy and its chaser and driving back to our flat for Scotch we had brought from Magwe, by some process of reasoning we had arrived at the age-old, evergreen—women! Masculine conversation is never invariably masculine; in fact it's surprising, even in peacetime when women abound, how often some sidelight on feminine reactions and idiosyncrasies plangently strikes the plough of conversation. What proportion of the mention is bawdy is neither here nor there.

One comment that night was the fact that women, logically enough by their own lights, cannot cope with this war business. Fighting for an ideal leaves them cold. The proof: Ask any

woman, whatever her intellectual life, who has the love of a man in the services, what she would do if she had the power to place her man in such a post that although it was a war job, part of that mealy-mouthed "effort," he could be kept out of danger!

Our host left us with the definite assurance that a peg of a night-time kept the malaria bugs away. On that warming thought, we washed our teeth, flopped into bed, and continued any old argument that popped up until we were too drowsy to keep our eyes open.

"Mike," I said—my last effort. "I'm all for a family. Twins run in my wife's family, you know!"

"How very nice for you, Ken. But what about Bill?"

"Oh, of course, she takes a dim view of twins, but as I said to her, think of the time it saves!"

Mike merely grunted. I closed my eyes—fatal action—and we were asleep. We did not hear Neville and Allan come in either.

Without opening my eyes, I became conscious at early light. It is a habit bred of the innumerable times I have had to hop out of bed for dawn readiness, and to this day I always become almost conscious round about five or six in the morning, although there is no necessity. That habit, and the other of tensing at the sound of a telephone bell, I shall no doubt retain for years to come, maybe until I die. But a warm satisfaction pervaded me as I realised where I was, and I hitched the blankets up to my nose and dozed off again.

Hours later, when the tea beside my bed had gone cold, I started thinking consciously again, with the reflection that that book had been right. It had told my fortune and prophesied that I would travel, but under unusual circumstances. Burma and India I had never included in any wishful-thinking itinerary, as an impecunious junior reporter, and now here I was.

Neville was first up that morning. We exclaimed, nay cooed, at his energy, Mike and I, while Allan rolled over and wallowed among the pillows in absolute luxury. So, late, at the breakfast-table we were not too popular with the staff. I didn't give a damn, why couldn't they realise what a pleasure it was for us—and I demanded strawberries and cream!

"Hog!" remarked Mike scathingly; and helped himself when they arrived.

We drove to the pool, and lazily smoked and read. I did not go into the water because I found my fair skin had taken the sun badly. The sun was obviously deceptively powerful in this cooler altitude; but I derived as much vicarious enjoyment out of watching Allan and Mike and Neville puff and blow and duck each other as if I'd gone in myself. Mike and I preferred to walk back over the fields and along the lanes.

At lunch we had lots more strawberries! And cream... wowzerrr!

During the afternoon we visited the Chinese shop again, and I finally bought the house-coat. When I would get it home to my wife I had no idea, but the thought of how pleased she would be was most satisfying. Allan declared it was merely to salve my conscience, because I had also bought myself a pair of silk pyjamas!

Our second evening was a pub crawl. Naturally we titivated ourselves, that was half the pleasure of the leave, dressing decently for the evening, and then we proceeded to the club for a start. I should mention that after we had shopped and walked a new lane and seen another part of the country, we met the lady who had been so amused at our eating and she invited us in for tea at her flat. Which was very nice and homely, specially watching her pouring out tea, sitting like my mother used to among the tea-pot and attendant mass of cups and saucers, plates of this and that.

However...at the Club we propped the bar a while, where I was introduced to one young woman, got arguing with another, rescued Mike from an old bore—he must have been the Club Bore—and then we somehow gravitated to another place. I forget whether it was a club or a restaurant, but all the time we were meeting fresh company and hugely enjoying our "social stuff."

From there we happened upon a sergeants' dance, at which we took one now tipsy swing round the floor, and then left to arrive up some road in the dark, guided by some odd type, at the sort of place in London one would call a "dive." Although it wasn't below ground level, it gave that impression as we sat inside. There was a villainous-looking barman-proprietor, who

viewed us suspiciously at first, but by then we had an affable Staff Sergeant of the Burma Rifles conveying us through the night life of Maymo. He nodded to the Greek, Italian, German, Turk, Dutchman, whatever he was, and the latter then produced some excellent cold beer. The three of us and the S.S. thoroughly enjoyed it; and I say three, for Allan we had lost once again—or he had lost us.

There was one soldier there so beautifully stunko I half expected trouble: but on the contrary, the sight of our blues was the occasion for an embarrassing flow of compliments. He swayed to his feet and came over to clasp me round the shoulder.

"Red," he slurred, "yetter pilot...au' yiv got bags of guts—" raising his hand—"...no, no...y'may laugh, gennlemen... this gentleman here..."—swaying over me affectionately—"...this gentleman here...ss'p'lot..."

He sat in my lap.

I said, "Have a beer!" And I suddenly clicked; not a plot, a machination, a pilot...you dope!

He slowly got to his feet, and from the stubborn look on his face I deduced that I'd mortally offended him.

"Have a drink...soyer won't drink with me...you, 'oo flies a- 'ere, what d'ye fly?"

Mike told him. Oh, stupendous—or words to that effect. Resignedly, I let him pour another bottle of beer into my glass; resignedly but not distastefully. However, we managed to buy our own whack as time dripped on.

Much later, as a night-cap suited to this convivial occasion, the Staff-Sergeant produced some Scotch at his own small bungalow, and we sat by his fire listening to his anecdotes of the fighting against the Japs. He was a man, he had seen plenty of action and, as might be guessed from the fact that he was in the Burma Rifles, he was well acquainted with the country and its people.

Of the yellow-robed priests he declared, "No, don't condemn them because they look villains, they're not; at least most of them aren't, in my opinion. They do harbour criminals, and some of them have undoubtedly been cells of fifth column activity—but because a lot of the Burmese would be quite willing to have the British out of the country. Believe me, down in some

areas--there's one town I have in mind--the priests were actually the ones who calmed the locals and kept 'em quiet!"

We sipped our drinks reflectively, proffered cigarettes round and then Mike inquired, "What good are the Japs? Are they really so wily as people make out?"

He nodded. "Oh, they're good all right; but merely because they're framed...and they've got guts. But they're curiously careless in some respects...behind their own lines, for example."

He went on to tell us of a patrol one day. "We got quite easily within a few yards of the Moulmein aerodrome, and I actually sat there for a full five minutes watching parties of Japs lounging about who were supposed to be on guard!"

"Then we crossed over, made down a bank, and I killed about a dozen myself with a tommy-gun before we had to push off. But, blimey, I'll give 'em this, when they did blow their whistles, the little men seemed to come from all over the place...They're well trained, no doubt about it!"

For his own Burmese troops he had no reproach at all. They had stuck by him on patrol far behind the Jap lines, and they had also gone on their own, and returned, on similar expeditions. The common man, the coolie, was quick enough, he thought, but led by some of the town elements might easily rage into ferocity for a week--and then subside as suddenly and return to the peaceful tilling of rice.

By now we were all become very sleepy, and it was only politeness that kept our eyes open. So, with a suitable remark and expression of thanks, we left him and returned to our beds. Our two days were finished.

As we finally took leave of our flat the next morning, another characteristic of India and Burma was in evidence. Lined up outside were more servants, bearers, sweepers, abdars, chokidars, water carriers, every blessed trade union in the racket, than I had ever noticed busying themselves in our interests. I'm afraid in our tipping we were not sahibs. If a man had done work for us then we handed him baksheesh; and if he exclaimed, relying on our incredulity, against the size of the tip, we said, "Hop it, George, unless you want your bottom kicked!" They seldom did.

Driving, or rather coasting, down that mountain merry-go-

round of a road was fatiguing as the journey up had been. We looked back at the cantonment before it was lost to sight and then relapsed into silence. I think one of us did mutter something about being bloody sorry to leave; but later that day, back at Magwe, we all remarked on how good it was to get back to the squadron.

The heat down in the plains was noticeable as we eventually approached Mandalay once more. This time we did no more than skirt it, passing the railway station which was thronged with persons evacuating to some place—God knows where.

I looked out at the pagodas again with great interest, then relapsed into a doze.

An hour or so later, returning to consciousness, a yellow insect, something like a wasp, came in at the window and settled on me. Ugh! I squashed it in a frenzy of disgust. That was only one snag of these tropical countries—insects, all shapes and sizes, repellent, armed with virulent stings, evilly coloured. I wondered if my father would really like to live in the sun, with the ants, the heat, the dirt, the disease...oh well, it had been a good two days, why gripe.

The metal of the car became hotter and hotter even as it sped through the countryside at never less than fifty. Once again, when we stopped for our sandwiches, we soon began sweating without the breeze of our passage. After consuming the contents of the cool palm leaf wrappings, we moved on our way hurriedly but wearily.

At long last we crossed the ford—the fact of plashing through the water gave a coolness to our turn of mind—and came driving slowly into the oil town once more. Threading past the hundreds of derricks, all protected by locked gateways and fencing, we made for the British Club. There, stretched out on a settee, we awaited a meal; and I noticed there were many more army personnel about since we had last seen the place.

Last lap. We drove at an easy pace and chatted about Maymo. To our right but still forward of us the sun was setting, and through the haze and dust spread a molten glow. Being familiar, it appeared peaceful and homely, yes, even that scrub, those occasional creaking bullock-carts, the impassive Burmese yokels, and the rare hut by the road at which would be sitting an old one, smoking away at his sort of hookah.

Once I took a pull at a hookah; but it is not for us. You need the stomach of a mechanical man to enjoy its flavour.

As the sun dropped below the Chin Hills, whose outline was traced on the pastel-shaded sky like the line of a piece of paper roughly torn apart, we caught sight of the eager nose of a Hurricane and the thin, spoke-like blades of the prop, in silhouette. The area of the aerodrome, the dusty tent, the various aircraft, emerged to our view, and at last we turned in through the broken-down gateway of the squadron mess and rolled to a halt.

"Hi-ya, Grifty!" Ricky's face peered over the balustrade of our veranda.

"Hi-ya, son! What's cookin'?"

There came a clump from inside the house, shoes on bare wooden stairs, and there were some of the boys standing outside grinning at us in greeting. We explained it all, emphasized the strawberries and cream more than once, and amidst a heartening welter of inquiries, wisecracks, and unpacking and scrambling for a turn in the bathroom, we finally cleaned ourselves and joined the C.O. and Sam down in our lounge. I glanced at the squadron crest standing up proudly on the sideboard.

"Hello, chaps... have a good time?"

We explained about the strawberries and cream again and had a drink. No doubt whatsoever—satisfying to be back among them.

Just at that moment I was somewhat surprised to see Jack Gibson's face at the door, and behind him Tex, Allan MacDon', and some more of the sergeants. "Hello," I called out, wondering what it was all about.

The C.O. became serious. "Come in, Gibson; come in, you chaps... Where's Allan? I shall want him on this show... Oh, good, you're here, Tommy!"

So that's it, I reflected soberly, we're right back into the swing, click, just like that. The C.O. explained what he wanted us to do when we went down to strafe Mingaladon to-morrow at dawn. The Japs had arrived like locusts at Mingaladon. Johnny Walker, Highland Queen, John Haig, every satellite—they were all crammed with fighters and bombers like cars packed outside a racecourse at a meeting.



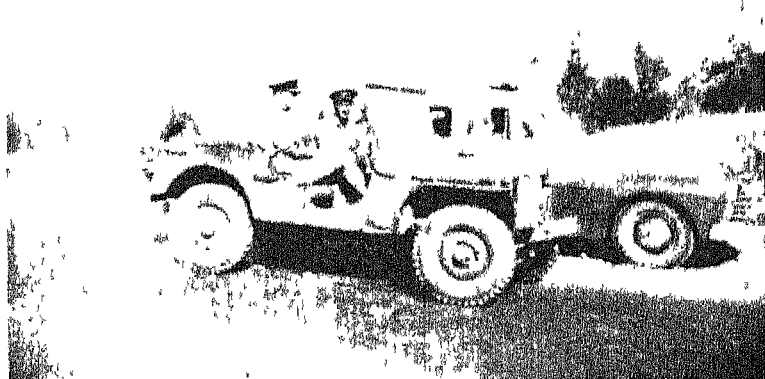
*Briefing. (I to R) Author, Jack Gibson, A.L.O., Allan Carvell,
own C.O. At Dispersal, Mingaladon.*



Back in Calcutta. Tommy, Allan MacDou', Jack Gibson.



*At Karachi en route. The Author, "Bush" Cotton, D.F.C., and
W/C. Frank Carey, D.F.M., D.F.C., and Bar.*



En route for China. Michael Osler and "Titus."

He showed us the P.R.U. photograph. "Look at that—wing tip to wing tip...and we can't miss!"

We looked, and truly our mouths opened. I, for one, had never seen such a concentration of aircraft before; it offended all our instinct of dispersal, which we had had drummed into us by hard practice at dusk, taxiing aircraft into the cover of the scrub.

"The Blenheims are going with us," the C.O.'s voice continued quietly. There was a hush in that room; one heard the scrape of a shoe, the cough of the next man, with acute clarity. "They'll bomb first, and then I'll lead you down. Now remember, you've got to get 'em, none of this wild spraying, pick out a machine, get your head on it and hold it there! The other squadron may be acting as some kind of high cover and will come in too, but all the same—keep your eyes skinned for their fighters!"

We nodded. There was a thoughtful silence. Then our minds had sorted out some of the possibilities, we shifted feet and commenced talking to each other. Soon, like a man tasting a new dish and finding he likes it, we chewed on the idea and grew volubly discursive. We checked with each other what we remembered of gun positions, of cover for the evasive run after strafing, and such like. The C.O. looked from one to the other and grinned; he was quite satisfied with the reaction.

Next he remarked cheerfully, "There must be well over two hundred and fifty machines down there. Oh boy, this is going to be some party!"

We chuckled. The way he put it reminded one of us of that swaggering old joke of the two Tommies who'd been promised a bob a time for every dead Jerry. One night he woke his pal with the words: "Bill... 'ere, come and look, we're in the money...tharsands of the bastards!"

So, our minds at high tension, we ate dinner, got to bed early, and lay there wondering...

What crossed my mind time and again was the fascinating thought of catching a Jap rising off the end of the runway, as they had at Moulmein. If only one could do that! If only one could...

I think the C.O. realised then that it was the beginning of the end for us. He certainly spoke, though, with an air almost

of awe that the Japs would be so silly as to park so many planes within reach of ourselves, where the Hurricanes could strike at them.

Yet he knew that we had hardly enough planes to cripple the air fleet down Rangoon way, and that after that first crack it would be a question of how long our few machines would last against continued heavy raiding. As in many other quarters of the war then against the Japanese, we could not bring a sufficient concentration to Burma. Many of us had an inkling how it was, and would be. I half suspected it; I'm sure Mike and Allan had a fair idea. However, it would be a good show. If we had to go farther back—Look out, China, here we come! ... Yippee!

CHAPTER IX

SIAMBLIES!

"GOOD LUCK, sir!" Tug Wilson's round face beamed at me as he held his thumb up and stood away to one side of the machine.

I grinned at him, helmeted and masked as I was, and thought, thank Christ, we're off. The half-hour between waking and, after a quick meal, arriving at the cockpit had been uncomfortable. Tommy had happily made us cackle with his humorous, deprecating account of a horrific dream in which he had force-landed and had been chased by lots of little Jap officers with immense swords. But, oh...that comical, contemptible tension before an event—ever since prep. school sports, not wanting to speak before the tussle; and after, gabbling like a gramophone set too fast!

Dust raced away from the C.O.'s tail, a thin spiral of dust rose, rope-trick fashion, from ground to whirling prop and he trundled off. Another followed, then I taxied out, turned about and, leaning slightly forward, coaxed the throttle-lever forward, forward... Absorbed, I was happy again.

Suddenly I cut the throttle and brake, for after gathering about fifty m.p.h. blue-grey smoke started to pour from both exhausts! Angrily I taxied out of the way, back to the picket-point, yelling out to Tug as he came running up. It was

a glycol leak and I would not be strafing the Japs that morning!

Freeing myself of straps and parachute and pulling off my helmet and gloves, I clambered slowly to ground and looked at the machine. One's feelings at such an anti-climax are an interecine mixture of frustration, shyly inner-voiced relief, and lastly, shame at not being with your comrades. The first is right: having prepared mentally for a task, one ought to go through with it. The second is natural: self-preservation. The third is illogical: but it is better to have such a reaction than not.

Usually, one exclaims more aptly, "Jesus, am I browned-off!"

Which I was, and I did; and walked off with Tug to the tent and cadged a lift back to the mess for another breakfast. I always think it is amazing, looking back now on that memorable day, that I did not realise as a macabre consolation what the implication was of that gathering of the Japanese clans down at Mingaladon!

After having a more leisurely breakfast and drinking an extra gallon of tea, I returned to dispersal. Our squadron was now established on a satellite strip of Magwe's aerodrome, situated about three-quarters of a mile up the Yennan-Yamng road, on the side opposite to the main landing-ground. This strip, like the others, was formed of levelled paddy fields, but its surface was above average though the dust was equally bad.

Myself and some of the pilots who had not been included in the strafing show sat there and smoked and sipped more tea and, naturally, wondered how the boys were getting on. At last there came a drone, and some machines circled and landed.

A few minutes later the tent was a babel amidst which the C.O. stood, smiling perpetually with delight. The general story was that they had knocked out a dozen or so Jap machines and, to round off the attack, had shot down one or two in the air. The latter were odd Jap fighters who had scrambled from Mingaladon itself and had also materialised from the satellites.

"Why, you little runt," Jack Gibson loudly declared, digging Tex Barriek in the ribs, and his southern drawl becoming most accented, "Ah owe yew mah life!"

Little Tex looked somewhat uncomfortable and murmured, "Wal, I guess he flew right up my sights!"

"What's that?" asked the C.O. with a grin, "Someone singe you, Gibson?"

"The little bastaard would have done," Jack affirmed, "but Tex heah was guardin' mah tail and shot him down. I could see them tracers a-whistlin' paast mah wings—"

"Yeh, boy," Ricky exclaimed in awe, "me too, I was fascinated, I could see the red streaks going over my cockpit, oh, so nice!"

We laughed. Somebody else described, "Gee, those little blighters have got guts. I was getting a bomber lined up through my sights as we came down and I couldn't help noticing out of the corner of my eye the mechanics at a fighter trying to swing the prop—while we were roaring down on them!"

The C.O. looked around thoughtfully. "Let me see...yes, I knew there was one short. Where's Frank?"

A pause. Ricky scratched his head.

"Nobody see him at all? Perhaps he stayed late and has only just arrived back at Park Lane. I remember, though... Allan, you went off to Highland Queen after them there, didn't you?"

"I think someone said something about him being chased on the deck," Allan remarked slowly, looking round, "but I can't remember. Who was it?"

The chatter diminished. After surveying the machines, it was found we could put five serviceable for operations again—many were holed—and I and Snooks Everard, Stinker, Ricky and Neville were left on readiness. The others went back to the billet and we arranged for some reserve pilots to return to the tent again to take over any machines that Mike could bring serviceable during the day.

We lazed around the tent, with childish satisfaction discussing over and over again the morning's raid. The heat accumulated, in the air, in the ground, in the metal of our machines, even in the shade of the scattered trees growing around the satellite.

As no one appeared with any food at lunch-time, I found a relief and drove to the cookhouse, where I obtained bread, onions, tomatoes, some tinned pilchards, and a bucket of char. Driving back carefully to avoid spilling the char, I found some new arrivals, also with odd items of food, and we settled down to

lunch. We used the small bamboo table as a sort of *hors d'œuvre* bar and picked at this and that quite happily.

The telephone rang!

"No," we mumbled, mouths full, "not a scramble!"

But it was.

Irritated, I defiantly stood for one second to gulp down a mouthful of tea—fatal if you have to fly for more than an hour—and then ran off to the machine. Full of food, I scrambled clumsily into the cockpit. I cursed as I clamped down the straps on my shoulders, which were sore from the Maymo sunburn, but it was a relief to squat on the parachute. I couldn't have run another yard.

The engines burred into action, we jockeyed for right of way and roared off. But our first reactions had been a little too much the tough old men of action, expressing boredom at having to fight during the lunch hour—so began what has officially been described as one of the heaviest raids, by Jerry or Jap, on an aerodrome during this war so far!

We had not even noticed the five A.V.G. machines, their total strength, taking off several minutes previously.

Circling, we got together and then I started to climb up north to gain height in comfort. Ops. was chattering and warning us: "Look out for bandits from the south-east at angles 15, look out..."

For some silly reason, I happened at that moment to look up west, and at what I saw veritably my mouth did pop wide open. "Jesus Christ, thousands of them!"

For a brief moment I looked east and south, too, and wherever I looked I could pick out bunches of weaving Jap fighters protecting formation after formation of bombers. It was, quite literally, fascinating. Automatically steering my machine onwards, I watched them until I suddenly realised that that nearby swarm of a dozen or so fighters was tumbling down in no clowning fashion—they were about to descend upon us!

I called out something over the R/T., I don't pretend it was very intelligible, and then dived down to earth. My reasoning was that, being unable to dogfight these little bastards, and there being fighters on most sides, the thing to do was not to attempt to climb up through them but to get down to the deck, sink away west and gain height in comfort. Then to come back and

pick off as many as possible from above. As many as possible ... huh, hurr!

The other four felt much as I did; but some, I believe, followed a better line of reasoning, which was not to go right down to earth but to dive, shallowly for a period, still going north, and then to start climbing and to return. As a consequence, Snooks and Neville got mixed up with the fighters above the aerodrome and got one each, though Neville got so shot up he had to force-land while the bombing was going on.

Having dropped like a hawk to earth, but from a different motive, I became fascinated by the spectacle being enacted at the aerodrome. First I saw a sudden storm of dust clouds and a thousand flashes erupt all over its area, and then black smoke gushed forth from a blitzed oil and petrol dump.

I remember thinking agitatedly, "Something must be done!" for over the other side of the aerodrome, coming over our mess through the dust and smoke, I caught sight of some jinking little Jap fighters. They were obviously down to strafe in between bombing.

I circled that aerodrome, trying to keep those Japs in sight, like an animal debarred by some fire from returning to its young. Quite honestly, I was agonised by doubt. Knowing how impossible it was to dogfight the Jap machines, my reason told me to hare off west and climb for height. Some indescribably twisted impulse led me fearfully round the scene and, while I was glancing up at the fighters and bombers swarming all over the sky above and wondering, "Nice if they were to drop bombs on me... humm, keep off the drome!" I lost sight of the strafing fighters.

I don't suppose I shall ever twist my neck voluntarily as much as I did then. Have you ever heard that phrase, "Don't look now, but..." I can laugh, but that was what I kept saying to myself. I must have been balmy.

A second or two later, over my shoulder I caught sight of a Jap with retracted undercart, an OI, rolling up and over behind me. Whether he saw me or not, I didn't stay to argue, he had thirteen trumps—I pushed everything forward and sped off up the river for a few seconds to shake him off. Then, as though the Lorelei were standing on top of the Watch Office, I edged back to the aerodrome. Talk about hide-and-seek!

Coming down from the north side, I caught sight of two of the

little 97s following one another in their no-doubt gloating merry-go-round.

I almost spat at them. "They're going to turn, no...yes, they'll see me..." My brain was telling me to have a care, and still I edged round following them, and I was so excited that I had forgotten to turn my sight on. But there was the Jap, red roundels, shiny surfaced wings, wheels hanging down in their spatted neutness. It looked like a large fly; it came closer, the wing-tips spread to the width of the armour-glass of my screen --I pressed the gun-button!

For a second he was apparently unmoved and flew smoothly on his curving course. Then he rocked from left to right, an amount of smoke appeared from the region of his engine and he turned to the right in a steep half-circle, going sharply down to the ground. I put my throttle wide open, fired a quick burst at the leading Jap and, only a second later, was watching the bastard over my right shoulder. Boy, can they turn! Oh, boy!... The pain of the straps on my sunburn didn't mean a thing.

"O, Christ," I was praying, "give me more speed, give... me...more...speed..." I rocked forward on my parachute seat like a crane demented by past tragedies. There came a "Bang!" a metallic sort of explosion like someone hitting a metal plate with a hammer--and I put my hand down to my leg!

Now that was a funny thing. Bush had been hit in the leg, and without doubt that was what I remembered in that second of panic, wondering straightway if my leg had been hit too. Of course it wasn't...silly! Then the dear old Hurricane pulled away and I went off round the drome once more. Talk about moths!... Roaring over the mess again, I caught sight of some of the Japs who were strafing still. I would have gone straight among them, but at that moment another batch of bombs landed on the runway and they hurriedly sheered off up north.

Over the river I spotted something which made me gulp with pleasure. Licking my dry mouth, I flew up to the other lone Hurricane and we grinned at each other vaguely. It was Ricky! Later we confirmed how inexpressibly pleased we were to meet at least one friendly aircraft among those hordes of Japs. In that moment of communion we could have been bumped off, of

course, as easily as you could push two lovers in front of an incoming train at a crowded railway station.

A second later I heard ominous clanking sounds from my engine and noticed the rad. temperature was on the high side. It was understandable, I had been going at full throttle and revvs for about an hour, without cessation, and I'd collected some bullets somewhere, perhaps in the engine. The Japs above still seemed to be queuing up to take their turn at bombing and strafing the aerodrome, so I decided I would have to fore-land a mile or two away. I slipped up the river at moderate throttle and the water looked so cool and inviting I would have loved to have stepped out and wallowed and relaxed.

A suitable stretch of green and brown cultivation appeared in the scrub and fissured land, so I turned right, eased off throttle - rad. now getting high, blimey! - looked my straps and went to it. I had to chance a final burst of throttle because a tree loomed up threateningly, and then there was a scraping, jarring rumble from beneath my nose. The prop showed white splinters where the blades were ground off, I was pulled forward against the straps and was sure the next second would see us upside down, that line of hedge came rapidly to meet me and... peace!

I looked around at the good earth. The Hurricane lay pitifully, a sizzling coming from its engine. I suddenly remembered the lack of scruple of Jap fighters, my sunburned shoulders and the danger of fire, and hurriedly jumped out of the cockpit. I ran over to the hedge, crouching down in its shadow and looking up somewhat fearfully. I was breathing deeply and irregularly.

Peace...

Despite the drone of bombers overhead, returning for a second run over Magwe, I could hear the buzzing of an insect, my own breathing and the pumping of my heart. I could have lain down and gone to sleep—in an instant.

Gradually I became aware of a continuous horn note, muted and tenuous. Grimacing to myself, I realised it came from the Hurricane and, getting to my feet slowly, I walked over and shoved the throttle forward, at the same time turning off the petrol-cock (black!) It would have been irritating to sit there and have my tranquillity disturbed by that damned squeal. I knew the bloody wheels weren't down...stupid...

A second vic of bombers passed overhead, so regular in forma-

tion, sounddisturbed, God damn their rutting little cocky souls. Fighters littered the sky like Christmas decorations, all over the bloody place. A rumble and a "Sw—jissih!" came from the vicinity of the aerodrome. I instinctively crouched down, then sat up and eyed the fresh column of oily smoke with a placid stare. I was out of it this time; I was down on the ground again, though; I'd better be going.

As I made a move to footslog back to the drome a fresh wave of bombers dropped another load, and I could see their fighters buzzing round angrily like flies over a dung heap. Once I looked up at some fighters that came my way.

"Snooping bastards...you obscenity little obscenities..." Like a bad-tempered fool I clenched my first at them, then I laughed. Come on, Hemingway, get on with it, mind these bloody thorns.

I think I must have been talking aloud too, for I was very hot, my sunburn was now become more than an irritation and, the tension of having to look in six directions at once having been taken away, I merely felt outraged at having been chased around so much. Stumbling down this river-bed, up that bank, through those hedges, I muttered, "One day...one day...there'll be fifty of us...not five...just you wait..."

How very dramatic, what! But, O God, believe my sincerity when I say how bitterly did we all wish to be, just once, that's all, just once, in a position where we had at least equal numbers!

At first the going back was not hard, leading me over grass and some cultivated fields. But that did not last, and soon I became absorbed in working my way through scrub with a few gaps or natural pathways among it. The bushes, as I found out at once by attempting to brush past them as one would brush past an English hedgerow, were alive with malicious thorns. I began to feel the heat badly, and I took off my red scarf and wrapped it over my head. My helmet and gloves which I was carrying—I had left the parachute, it was too much of a lump—became a nuisance, but I had had them ever since early flying days and they were of sentimental value.

The ground seemed to become rougher, though that may have been my weary imagination, and once upon coming to quite a deep river bed, I could reach the other bank only by crawling on my hands and knees through the undergrowth. I

was scratched and scratched again, the sweat poured down my face, from my brows into my eyes, and I could smell and taste its saline acidity. It oozed down my front and back, the tops of my trousers became sticky, wet, my shoulder blades and skin flaming and aching all the time because of the sunburn.

But the worst thing was the thirst. I had had a drink only a couple of hours previously, yet my mouth was so dry I could believe the saliva had solidified and turned to grit.

On a slight rise, I paused. One's thoughts, the feeling of movement in one's body can be described as making a noise! Laboriously walking, I had been absorbed by it. Now, still, I realised in the truly peaceful silence around me—the planes had gone. Only the sigh of a leaf as it fluttered in a miniature heat whirligig came to my ears.

There was no need for a compass; over there was the oil smoke rising from the aerodrome. You probably have experienced the continual disappointment of negotiating flat terrain when you were eager to cover ground quickly; the one building I could perceive, a hangar, seemed as far away as ever. I tramped wearily down another gully and after scrambling painfully to the top, found I had to make yet another of the maddening detours I was finding necessary more frequently because of the rougher nature of the country.

My thoughts became as circuitous as my path. Alone, man reflects at the best of times in a delirious sequence, I always think. What with the heat and sense of outrage and feelings of wonder and satisfaction and pleasure that were then richly staining my grey matter, I must have certainly had an odd, probably a comical, look on my face.

"...boys must think I've had it...they'll laugh when they see me come crawling back...think they'll be glad, though... 'sgood feeling...wonder if they could see me behind that Jap from the satellite...no, shut up, you're no ace...damaged?...these foul bushes...Christ, my bloody shoulders...must have been couple of hundred of 'em...twenty to one is just silly...ha, ha, ha! Oh boy, am I laughing? It's so silly..."

I stumbled and nearly fell to the ground.

"...does seem like a dream, though, now—mmm, yes... just like Gourcock: the ships, night watch on the bridge, with the

Lewis gun, the skipper...time's funny...up there I was hours, days...now I can see it was just one stroke of the scythe... humm, not bad; but what if it had been a down stroke? Eh, you stupid mull?

"Ricky may be wondering what to tell Bill... Oh, shut up, don't be morbid...but how would you tell Win about him... maybe he's just getting his wings now from Peter at the gate! ...The little obscenity bastards...yes, that's what browns you off, not being able to nource them, just fighting as a gesture almost...Oh, what the hell, others had it in France, it's got to be done...maybe they did get wine there, eh...well, so what, we had strawberries and cream...What a war!...strawberries and cream!...

My eyes filled with sweat. I paused.

Cursing the bent and the thorns, my self and I agreed also that courage was a matter of training in a way, provided there was a reason for being courageous. That in this aerial fighting, probably in all battling, there was a thrill, maybe morbid, maybe of worth-while accomplishment. That I had a long life-line on my palm, but it was obviously presumptuous expecting God to grant the favour of life to myself because I was myself; and life-lines don't bind down a hundred Jap fighters! And that, lastly, I was going to have the biggest mug of tea I'd ever had in my life back at the cookhouse—so stop thinking a lot of metaphysical cock!

I tried to concentrate on plodding along, and it was hot and bloody and made me feel sick inside, and a silly phrase persistently reiterated through my brain: "Survival of the fittest, old boy that's the thing, Survival of the fittest...survival of the fittest...ha, ha! and ha! again..."

Now an ache spread through all my joints, and there was a sore on both heels. The crepe rubber of my shoes had become hot, I could feel it like salt water in a cut every time I took a step. Then at last the hangar, as I glanced up from behind the dangling folds of the scarf, was really just there, a few hundred yards away.

I trudged across some open country, past a bamboo hut where there were Burmese troops who eyed me dispassionately, and walked carefully, so as not to betray my absolute weariness, into the A.V.G. hut. There were two of them sitting inside.

"Any water?"

"Sure!" One of them rummaged at the far end of the tent and handed me a thermos cupful. Ah!

"Thanks a lot." They weren't curious, and after a few minutes I stood up. We exchanged a few remarks about the raid, and with that I went outside and headed across the runway for the billet. I noticed the sand and dusty earth and barrenness of the country helped hide the bombing scars. Anti-personnel craters did not show up particularly; the only obvious devastation was where some of the machines, a Blenheim, for example, were burnt out, and the smoke rising still from the oil and petrol dump, which showed up as a blackened plot against the grey-yellow earth and scrub.

I reached the cookhouse, and the men there looked at me curiously. They instantly realised I had walked back from somewhere, and in a trice the cook had me sitting down on an empty packing-case, a mug of tea in one hand, a plate of cold fish and bread and beetroot and onion in the other. They tried not to worry me; but they could not keep silent, and soon I was shooting the biggest line of my career. It was like a home-coming, though, to sit among them to feel one was very, very welcome, that they were glad I'd got back. That was the brotherhood of mankind *in excelsis*.

"Gritty!"

I looked up slowly.

Ricky came over and smacked me on the back. "You old bastard, Pop, where have you been? We all thought you'd had it!" With a final chuckle, "Oh, boy!"

I grinned at him. "After you've finished lacerating my sun-burnt flesh, you chattering Canuck, I'll try and explain...and it's a good line!" As we went off together, there was all the warmth and delight in the world round my innards.

Jogging along in his truck, I told him about it all, and we compared experiences. As we eventually walked into the tent there arose an excited chatter and the boys all grinned at me as though I had brought them a month's pay each. Ken Wheatley said, in his quiet, even tones, his eyes smiling, "Well, well, if it isn't old Grittywhiskers...Here, have some tea, Gritty!" And he handed me his own mug!

Half laughing, I tried to explain how I'd been chased all over

the bloody sky, and they pulled my leg about, "letting some harmless Jap take the water out of you!"

I think that was Tex. And so on. Their joking was eloquent to me as no other form of welcome would have been; and the few who did say, "We really thought you'd had it, Ken!" muttered the words quietly, as an aside.

Going back to our mess later, I happened to remark to Ricky about meeting that lone Hurricane, and how glad I had been to meet a friend among all those foes. He chuckled and revealed that it had been him, how he'd felt precisely the same.

"I somehow thought it was you, Pop," he exclaimed, "although I wasn't sure of the letter of your aircraft...which one you'd taken!"

Then we both giggled again at the idea of the two of us clinging together in mid-air like two spinsters up in a balloon basket.

Who should turn up at the mess that evening but Frank. He and I thereupon swapped walking-back experiences until the boys murmured, "Look at those two, nothing to stop 'em becoming Air Vice-Marshals now they've walked back from a crash!" Before dinner, and after, the sergeants were with us, and I expatiated by the hour about my experience. By the time I'd swallowed my fourth whisky I had it off pat.

Frank had been lucky, indeed. He had collected some bullets after strafing and mixing it with some of the airborne Jap fighters, and in the escape had lost his bearings to some extent, besides being chased off his course. The result was he had had to force-land round about Zaigon. It had become no-man's land, but he had found the road and picked up an army truck scurrying back to Prome. The Army had treated him handsomely, and from Prome, of course, it had been easy to arrange a lift back to Magwe.

The C.O. was smiling and in happy mood, though he must have been perplexed inside. Whatever the difficulties of the morrow, he was content that the spirit of his men and pilots still was sound as a cable, with no loose ends. The beer we had scrounged specially for the old sweats like Tug and Chiefy Guest disappeared as if we were handing round thinblefuls—which we weren't.

When I eventually lay down on my bed I realised how bad my sunburn was. Hardening, the skin was painful to touch. I lay

for quite some time, looking over the veranda rail, listening to the sounds that accompany the silence of the night—a dog's bark, the muted presence of some night bird, creakings in the wooden structure of the house. At last I buried my face in the huddle of folded sheets serving as a pillow and slept on my stomach.

Next morning, moving about completing our sketchy toilet, the C.O. advised me to put myself U/S. for the day. So I went to sick quarters before breakfast, Mike taking me in his truck.

The Doc there had just arrived from down south, and was quite a character. He was an elderly man, and it was obvious that a sturdy patriotism alone had brought him into a service in this war. His facilities were limited; he had just an ordinary, not very clean, house overlooking the polo ground, but he was cheerfully coping. He chatted to me continually as I sat, the while he bathed my shoulders and back and arms in some yellow solution, and then powdered me like a baby.

The siren stridulated while he was busy and he simply ignored it. The orderlies quietly left to take cover, and there enveloped us that curious quiet that follows the wailing. His voice and mine echoed in the room. "Must finish this off, then we'll go..." Finally he stood up and we went out ourselves.

Outside, even the birds, the lizards, and the tree rats seemed to be under cover. One could see nothing, although they could have been just round that tree trunk, under that gable, listening with bated breath for another monstrous, inhuman drumming.

So we waited, I in a ditch, the Doc farther down the road and behind a stone paving, buttressed to span the ditch. We arose gladly when the All Clear sounded and I drove off with Mike again to have some breakfast, or at least to see if there was any left. Luckily there were one or two others like ourselves who had been caught on their way, and so the cooks provided us with a scratch meal. The tea at least was warm, even if those damned ducks' eggs did rest on my plate in clammy squalor.

Our respite was shortlived. Again the sirens wailed, and this time we scampered to the trenches, like monkeys taking flight. We were justified; my surmise that this was business proved correct, the Japs coming over not so very long after.

Crouching in the trench, with Captain Hwang of the Chinese

Air Force alongside me, we felt the earth tremble and we crouched lower...and you noticed the next man's breathing and the breathing of the man farthest from you also!

The Captain and his fellow-officer—they were both typically Chinese, high cheek-boned but not obviously slant-eyed, young and smoothfaced—bobbed up occasionally to check on proceedings. They nodded to each other and to us as if everything was going to plan, which it was—the Jap's plan!

What worried us most was the string of OIs that came down and, after a brief undulation overhead like some menacing sea-serpent, strafed the aerodrome. Then the droning of the fifty odd bombers withdrew from our ken demurely—I won't say apologetically—and we stood up to gaze at a new column of smoke. Then came the irregular crackle of .303 ammunition exploding too.

Mike and I encountered Allan, and we rushed to the aerodrome. By now it was honeycombed with small craters of the A.P. bombs the Japs are so fond of; and there was other kind of litter as well. We found some of our men of the M.T. section had had a "shaky do"! One lad had carried on, with cold-blooded courage, dispersing vehicles while the bombing was in progress.

Finally we reached our dispersal tent. Here, on the satellite, there was one small reason for satisfaction, namely, it was quite clear the strip must be as yet unobserved. The few unserviceable fighters we had had to keep on the ground were well dispersed among the scrub, and no bombs had come near them or the strip, that was evident. We noticed first, however, the absolute desertedness of the place—open tins on the table inside the tent, no human being in sight. Then, as our car rumbled quietly along the strip, a head appeared from some shallow ditch a hundred yards away; some more figures stood up to the right. The explanation was simple: they could not hear any sirens, and a scramble by telephone from Ops. was their only warning. Once down their holes they naturally stayed down.

The boys in the air started to return and nobody, at the final count, had "had it," so that was fair enough. But the machines were declining; in fact, I might almost say, disintegrating. Poor Mike was unable to give them any of the normal, inviolate inspections and, apart from bullet-holes, they were being

flown until they seized up, as mine had done, or until they blew up.

One happy circumstance was that our new additions, "Shorty" Miller, "Snooks" Everard, "Slim" Lewis, all three Canadians, were reacting well, and the C.O. was more than pleased to have them with the squadron.

We all hung around the tent and Allan sorted out readiness, after conferring with Mike and Flight Guest. Our one query, naturally, was a wistful one concerning new planes. As we realise now, our hopes were futile; even then the Command had had to begin thinking in terms of the defence of India. It was France all over again.

Sit'ing there, joking and laughing at the mock terror of this pilot or that as he described how, "One of those little devils flicked right up my bottom!" we grew hungry. Being U/S. like the Hurricanes, I went off and fetched grub from the cook-house. Bully, Aussie sausages—at which I crowed with delight—onions, bread, a bucket of steaming char, it all looked the turtle's flippers to us! Tex and Jack Gibson made pigs of themselves with a jar of peanut-butter they had bought at Yennan-Yaung.

I've said it before, I think, but it bears repeating: Always, when I'm eating on a drone, there's a scramble!

The bell tinkled feebly, but it was enough. Those who were without machines, like myself, ran outside, and we legged it through the scrub to a natural ditch about five hundred yards away. We sweated ourselves to walking pace, we groaned to a trot again, we puffed and cursed and snarled at the sky. Then we stood about.

Nothing but silence, bar the humming of some Merlins. Jack looked around and frowned, "God damn it, Ah'm gonn' back for mah grub; it's just a reece!"

I was dubious; but I was also fed up at having my meal interrupted, so I went back with him. One or two followed. We nibbled away, had some tea, and then I cocked my head. "Hey...listen!"

"Ooooh. Roy!" I wasn't the first out of that tent. Down across that rough earth, stumbling, cursing, we ran, with the droning of Jap motors menacingly catching up on us. It was a guttural sound, easily distinguishable from any of our machines.

As we jumped down the slope into the ditch, which was wide and more like a trough than a fissure, we nearly kicked Doug Cropper and Sgt. Moody in the face. There we waited, breathing hard and crouching against the earth. The guttural drone came overhead, overhead, filled the air, the earth, the plants, our brains, with an all-pervading vibration... Come on, get it over, get it over...for Christ's sake. What're you waiting for?...

"Here she comes, fellers!" Jack cried.

There was that familiar swish, the noise one can make with teeth and tongue, rapidly rising, and then the explosions, in tune a long roll on a drum, but in volume a cataract of Thor's forgings. Finally, three crashes reverberating above the general cacophony, nearer in succession. We all thought then the fourth had our number on it. Later, examining the craters, we found we were right—but there had been no fourth!

The drowning now seemed neither to diminish nor to swell. "Go on, run away!" someone breathed bitterly. He was quite serious and we listened as grimly.

"Next time," I muttered to Doug Cropper, his nose to earth alongside mine, "we'll go north of the strip!"

I lifted my head, for the drowning seemed to be abating. "Shorty" Miller stood up and began to take pictures of the smoke and confusion. At that moment I caught sight over his shoulder of the familiar string of Jap fighters, flying down in graceful curves to strafe. Christ, if they once saw us! The ditch was wide, as I have said, it gave no cover against a strafing plane, there was only the shade of some flattened scrub on one side, and one scarecrow of a tree.

"Stay down, Shorty, you idiot!" I yelled—not loudly, as if I feared the Japs would hear me!

Shorty was rapt, though. Jack snarled out, "Lie down, or I'll plug ye!"

Shorty turned and grinned, but did then go over to the cover provided by the trees.

The fighters passed by, none of us daring to look directly up at them in case our white skins attracted their attention. We knew ourselves how easily a suddenly upturned face could catch a roving pilot's eye. Thank God, they did not see us; and by a miracle they failed to see, or took no notice of, the strip.

At last they, too, had gone and we all stood up. Oil smoke, craters, scattered heaps of earth, dust and haze! The aerodrome looked as if it was still under construction, a muddle, but a deliberate muddle caused by a strike of workers running amok and tipping everything and anything upside down.

I don't like being bombed.

We went back and had a mug of lukewarm tea and a cigarette. Although we chatted animatedly, we felt quieter inside. No denying the facts, it was a bad business for us. Oh for some machines!...

There are people, like a friend of mine who was in the A.F.S. during London's blitz, who say they don't mind bombing. My friend declares he is of this mind, but only because he is so busy he hasn't time to think. I agree; to argue that if you are going to be killed by a bomb, then, fatalistically, you will be willy-nilly, certainly enables one to arise undeterred; but to imply that it is nothing, that those who crouch low when the bombs drop are contemptible, is obviously the insensate expression of no more than a blockhead. Personally, I don't think it an easy method of acquiring a reputation for courage. Most pilots, naturally, would far rather be in the air during a raid, whatever the odds against them, as we would have preferred that afternoon.

Some of us, as that had been the second of the two daily runs the Japs were now making over Magwe, returned to the mess. There was nothing much else to do, so I went with them, hoping that we should hear of reinforcements—or something!

Consequently I missed the C.O., who arrived at dispersal fresh from a conference with an important decision of policy. I received news of it by Tommy coming stamping up the veranda.

"Get packed. Ken, quickly as you can, you're coming along with me, Allan, Tex, Gibby, some others; we're taking the eight remaining Hurries that can be got off the deck over to Akyab!"

"What the hell!" I exclaimed angrily.

"Don't gripe me," Tommy snarled back, resignedly, "those are the C.O.'s orders—we two, Tex, Gibby, Allan MacDou', Gordon Peters, Doug, Cropper, Ken Wheatley!"

"Why, that's all B Flat! I don't like it, Tommy. I know what'll happen, we'll lose the squadron and get hitched around——"

"Well, get packed quick, God damn it," Tommy advised. "We've got to go to-night, and the rest of your kit the Adj. will look after."

Utterly browned-off, I tried to decide what few things to stuff in my parachute-bag. "What's the plan for us anyway?" I finally controlled myself and asked.

"C.O. says we're getting no more machines here; the squadron's moving up to China...seems to think we've had Burma...we're to drop these wrecks of ours at Akyab, where they can use 'em for spares and perhaps have time to make a couple serviceable; then we're to get to Calcutta and wait there until the C.O. comes over!"

"You mean he'll fly across and try and arrange for new machines, then we'll take 'em back to China! Hmm, not so bad..."

He grunted as he fugged at his bag. "Yep, I guess so, Ken."

Silently and sadly I packed away. Sam turned up, and I handed over to him the rest of my kit, two suitcases, the camp-kit roll. He smiled at my face. "Cheer up, Ken, you're like a bride who's lost a husband on the first night!"

"That's vulgar," I said acidly, then grinned. "Well, see you in China, Sam...soon!"

"Yes," he answered confidently. "Ricky's got the transport very well organised, and we're completely mobile. Cheerio, Ken."

We descended the stairs, Tommy and I, picked up the sergeants, who were still packing, and joined forces at the strip. Tug was rushing around, cursing ground crews and making them work at high pressure. At one end of the strip, pulled to the side, was Allan's prang, a mournful reminder of our impotent unserviceability. If only Mike had more tools, more spares; if only we had more machines...

Allan, incidentally, crash-landed in curious circumstances. He had attacked some Jap bombers, and finally dived away because of intercepting fighters. They had chased him down and he had dived at no mean speed, then pulled out and twisted back to climb up again. After the engagement was concluded, he had returned to land and had run through his cockpit drill in the customary manner. Everything had been in order, apparently, green lights showing his wheels locked down. They

were down, yes, but splayed outwards under the wing, so when he checked the stick to touch down, to his astonishment he found himself grinding along in a belly landing.

In his pull-out the wheels had unlocked and then the great wind pressure had acted on the fairings to force them outwards! We had never known of a Hurricane doing that before, and I am sure the mishap had something to do with the conditions we were operating under—the heat, the humidity, and the limited facilities for servicing. His machine was just then being stripped for spares.

We said cheerio to those lucky fellows who were going with the road party to Lashio. Then we hurried to pack our kit, odd bundles such as a shirt wrapped round underwear, parachute bags, brown paper parcels, into the fuselage somewhere, perhaps in the gun-panels or behind the armour plating. The light was failing, and the trip ahead of us would require almost an hour's flying.

That was the evening of March 22nd.

As we formed up over the aerodrome, I looked down at the polo ground, at our mess, at the temple, down the road where Ops. had done their best to give us service, at the white pagoda on the opposite bank of the river. The setting sun threw long shadows and the river surface was assuming the dull sheen of night. Transport was moving down this road and that, and the whole scene in its model-like scale appeared inexpressibly tranquil. Even the battered drome itself appeared untouched, recuperating under the salve of dusk. Leaving the squadron and Magwe our feelings were akin to those of workers who are forced to vacate a derelict town—the town of their birth—and seek employment elsewhere.

I turned my head and looked at the ranges we had now to climb back over once more. Our whirling propellers broke up the sun's rays in queer fashion, as if God was using the sun for some monstrous heliograph. The white pagodas receded, and the green felt of jungle and forest advanced. On and up, up, we flew, all the time wondering about our machines. Once, when we had surmounted the highest craggy range and were gradually losing height but were still over wicked country to have to force land in, Allan MacDou's engine cut and spluttered...

He called out something over his R/T. and we all throttled back, lunging in the air like basking sharks. Then his engine revived, and by unspoken agreement we all dived shallowly in steadily increasing speed at the flattened outline of Akyab we could now see ahead of us.

Here the country below was similar in many ways to that over which we had lately been operating. It was evolving to fields and paddy and odd hamlets; but it did have more water-ways and it was greener. And because of this healthier colour, it was somehow quite different, and I might have walked from a dusty street, alive with traffic and hawkers and shoppers, into the peace of a high-walled garden in the grounds of a large house. This was another world.

Already, during that short trip, we were flying in more relaxed manner. There was no watchful battle formation, but every now and then we would sidle up to one or another nearby machine and formate with it for company's sake, as we used to flying in the north of Scotland. Yet we missed the tension; already we realised we had now no roots, we were evacuees even from the R.A.F.'s point of view!

Then we came over the island, ready to jink if they took us for hostile planes and opened fire. None of us could pin-point the main aerodrome precisely excepting Jack, and so we straggled out. I myself flew twice round one of the satellite strips before I caught sight of another Hurricane, wheels down, flying away from me. I followed him in, slipping my wheels down and looking at the coast, then the harbour, the town...the tree-tops came up to meet us, here was the hangar roof...check...a rumble and we were all taxiing this way and that like ants in luc-and-ery, looking for a suitable place to disperse.

A car came swiftly over the lovely grass, and some crews directed us to where it was desired to park us.

We then strolled over the grass, so delightful a sensation after the harsh rubble of Magwe. The air was soft, pleasant, with an ambient tang of sea, and S/Ldr. "Slug" Elsdon, D.F.C., listened to our tale with great interest.

I looked round later and grinned. They were just about to lay out a flare path for practice night flying. 'Practice flying! Jeess...I couldn't believe it! We wandered towards the S/Ldr.'s car and I was making some joking remark when a loud voice

bellowed out, "Ken...Ken...you old bastard, what the hell!"

I was astounded, it was familiar that voice, but who the devil could it be? The last time I had heard those tones had been in England surely...

"Why, Guy!"

F/Lt. Guy Marsland came roaring over in his car, jumped out, and we crowed with glee and surprise at meeting each other again. You know how it is! But the last time I had seen him was at O.T.U. where we had been instructing together.

Slug grinned. "You'll take Ken along, Guy!"

I got in Guy's car the while he continued with his arrangements for the flying, and steadily, as he bellowed out odd orders, I explained and warned and advised and joked about our own experiences.

Then we went for a snort. A very Big Snort!

CHAPTER X

AKYAB

As we walked over to the shelter near the mess, Tommy gurgled in his funny, high-pitched cackle: "C.O. said we must rest, keep quiet, eat and sleep...oh *Boy!*"

We laughed too. Those persistent Japs seemed to be following us. We huddled down the shelter, which was a well-made affair, covered by stout-timbering and banked earth, and just waited.

I thought to myself there must have been some pretty smart fifth column work at Magwe—the Japs were raiding Akyab for the first time seriously this morning, the one following our arrival! That was more than a coincidence. However, I found myself a slightly more comfortable spot to crouch and stayed down.

Wonder how Guy will make out? Hope he remembers, for Chris'sake, not to dogfight the little blighters! Getting a bit browned-off with this bombing...Think of it, if I hadn't missed that boat I might have been...where, God knows, Malta...What does it matter?...

The previous evening in the mess Guy, typically, had sworn at me when I had attempted to buy a round. There had been a good mob having a snort, including a great tall A.V.G. fellow, dark-haired, moustached, almost Falstaffian in manner. This was Jim Regis, A.V.G. photographer. Brownie, who had flown with us at Rangoon, was there, too, back with his squadron which was acting in the defence of Akyah, and Kitley, and several others we knew. They had welcomed us, and naturally been eager for any new "gen" we could recount.

The mess was in some sort of club building, and had a properly laid out bar. At dinner, set neatly on a polished table, I had been fascinated by the huge punka, a large swinging cloth fan over our heads pulled to and fro by a cord which disappeared down a hole in the floor to the hands of some sweating helot below. Then our billet, to which Guy drove us later, was a clean, double-storied house in a still well-kept garden. It was all so green and civilised after the dust and heat of Magwe. At night, falling off to sleep, a pleasant zephyr had made it easy, a pleasure; and walking to the mess in the morning, about three-quarters of a mile along a road leading among houses and grounds, the air cool with the suspicion of a mist, had given us a grand appetite.

There came to our ears the rolling rat-tat-tat-tat—smoother than that onomatopoe—of machine-guns, faintly to be picked out from high above. And the next instant we all muttered something as we recognised that guttural drone, which was materialising with growing persistence.

"Here we come, boys!"

Doug. Bailey, the South African, was outside the shelter still and he started a running commentary. "Ah yes, a vic of bombers, one, two, four, six...about twenty-seven of 'em, coming overhead..."

He came inside and joined us. The drone pressed down louder, permeated the atmosphere, lost direction so that one could picture bombers closing in from all points of the compass. Then, the familiar, detestable *swwiikssshhhh!* Crump, crump, crump—all in a downpour of sound. The earth shook, and one bang came distinctly close. We were not so far from the aerodrome.

Followed the thump, thump, thump of Bofors guns and the nearer snarling of fighters, as if in their gnat's frenzy of a *melee*

the vicious circus of them had whirled immediately overhead. The centre of the Martian storm remained, then at last the bombers passed away. Finally, as I have always noticed, the last withdrawal of the guttural droning sounded so peaceful, and, by my grandfather's pantaloons, it meant peace too. For a few hours!

That was that. It included a direct hit on a hangar and on the Watch Office.

Later, we heard that a naval officer had also been smashed to pulp not very decently. His was a tragedy, if the story I heard then was true. 'Twas said his wife and kids had been sunk at sea, and that his mother had been bombed to death at home! I can think of no comment on such obliteration; except that one might ask, "Why?"

"...with all its obliterated tongue it murmured. 'Gently, brother, gently, pray.'"

Tommy and I emerged from the shelter. We grinned at each other as we straightway decided we ought to call and report at the S.H.Q.—to find out about getting a move on to Calcutta.

So we scrounged a vehicle and drove to the building along the harbour front. Affairs there were being run as we had seen Air Force matters being conducted in England; there was no finding the C.O. in the shade of a dusty bamboo roof. Tommy did the talking, and came out with the news that we would probably have to be transported by boat; but there could be nothing definite arranged that morning.

Shrugging our shoulders, we went back to idle away time at the mess, and after lunching we returned to the billet. The other boys had strolled off through the fringe of trees and undergrowth along the coast to the beach, where they had had a delightful bathe. We heard their voices jabbering away on the return as we arrived. The whole atmosphere was, indeed, very pleasant, but for the expected afternoon raid. However, this did not materialise, and to have tea in the lounge, in an arm-chair, was a welcome change.

After I had shaved with Tommy's razor, we later went to the mess for our evening meal. Guy was jubilant about having been able to raise a couple more machines from the wrecks we had flown over, by juggling with old spares; and though he and the rest of the squadron were considerably grimmer after having

battled with the seventy to one hundred Japs that morning, they were confident. Indeed, as is common and natural, after the first dust-up, they had lost the petty tension that develops during quiet periods. I was sorry to learn, however, that Brownie had baled out, having been "shot up the rump," and had been badly burned in consequence, principally on his face and legs. Indeed, the boys wondered how the hell he had got out, upon seeing the condition he had been in when they had picked him up.

We had a snort, but a much different kind of meal this night. The bearers, bar the dignified abdar, one of the old school of Indian servants, had all vanished. And dear old Kitley was floating round, muttering, "Lost my bloody dhobi again, I suppose!"

As I had noticed from Rangoon upwards, such times during such a campaign bring rumours by the covey. One which apparently had a certain authenticity, however, was that a Japanese fleet was now in residence at the Andaman Islands!

Jim Regis drawled, "Oh Boy... *Oh Booyy*, well, I guess I c'n swim off this goddamned island. 'Nother whisky, please!"

Tommy just gurgled in speechless, sardonic humour.

I said, "Hold it, Tommy, you're slap-happy, son, take it easy."

"But no," he spluttered, "just think, we came here to swim and eat, to have a rest... To-day they bomb hell out of us, and now the fleet's just down the coast gittin' ready to blast us up... oh, hahahahahahaha!" He went off in a cackle of mirth, and I had to giggle with him.

Jim looked sour and whispered aside to me, winking, "He's crazy, let's you and me build us a sampam!"

Another rumour, and I believed it was more scaremongering from some bazaar source, maybe inspired, was that Jap parachutists had been seen dropping down up the coast in the vicinity of Cox's Bazaar. With such bright factors to consider, we walked back to the billet and turned in. The thought of the fleet—Scylla and Charybdis! If they did care to steam up the coast, it was plain they would play merry hell wherever they liked. So what the hell; we soon got to sleep all the same.

However, I had a dream in which I was tip-toeing round the island, vaguely, as dreams go, and I looked through the window

of the billet to see the Jap generals. They had taken our billet as an H.Q. Creeping through the hall, I had burst in upon them and was holding them up at pistol-point. And that was the limit of the dream, the last feeling being that at any moment someone was going to come into the room behind me and then—what would I do?

Tommy woke me and said, "Come on, Ken, let's hop along and get some breakfast while we've got the time. If we don't go now, we'll be caught in the middle of the morning raid!"

That aroused me quickly enough, and in a short while we were walking along the road. It was sufficiently cool to induce us to keep in the sun; where the trees cast a shadow you could feel the lingering chill of the night. I could imagine myself back at the cantonment, Mayno.

When we walked into the mess, the rooms were unkept and furniture was standing awry as it had been left the previous night. It was only too plain the servants had gone. However, we sat down and to our surprise the abdar produced breakfast.

"I think we're Jonahs, Tommy," I remarked, "atmosphere here's beginning to deteriorate to the old 'take your fork out of my wrist' jungly business we've just left!"

The sirens started wailing!

At first we walked out to the shelter by the mess, but as nothing transpired after fifteen minutes, we looked at each other and silently agreed to get away from the aerodrome. If we had time to get back to the billet there was no sense in hanging around acting as magpie to the probable Japanese target: the aerodrome. So we hurried along the peaceful road, whose trees and gardens and delightful houses were now downcast by the lowering menace from the east; and after a comical side-glance at one another, we broke into a trot. We found the others standing and waiting at the shelter in the garden of the billet. They grinned as they watched us come panting up.

There were three siren warnings that morning, and the over-worked Hurricanes were scrambling up and being recalled in heart-breaking uncertainty. But at the third warning they stayed up—and we stayed by our shelter.

We were all pretty bomb-conscious by now; and so, was big Jim Regis, who came pounding up the road, sweating and puffing, some time after Tommy and I had arrived. We cheered.

"Oh B—O—Y!" he grinned. "Oh B—O—Y...I got here, didn't I, I made it, eh! Oh B—O—Y!"

At that moment we were grouped round the entrance to the shelter. I happening to be standing with one foot on the second step, the other foot above, and I was leaning with my back to the roof of the shelter. From the house—as we subsequently found—came a noise just like the harsh swish of bombs dropping and the next second there was a simultaneous dive for the shelter. They were all so quick. I did not have time to turn and their bodies pinned me against the roof.

"Oi...belt up!" I gasped.

Jim was scrumming hard, head down. Then everyone stood back and sorted themselves out. We grinned sheepishly, for there was no sound of bombers overhead.

"Oh, jeeze," Tommy suddenly chuckled, "if that don't beat everything...look!"

One of the lads came out of the house with some cloth in his hand—he had been tearing it for a bandage—and that was what we had heard. We all laughed, which was good for us too, for the next moment we did hear the bombers coming—the real thing. But this time we walked down below in good order, all so polite that you had difficulty in persuading the next man to enter before you.

They bombed us without mercy again; but it was not half so bad, situated where we were. Someone commented that they'd also let loose a basketful over the dock area. Not long after we had nodded our head in agreement, listening to the rumbling and crashes and droning, there came the sound of two distinct explosions, very much louder than anything before, from the same direction. We could not see each other, there was only a queer half-light reflected round the earthen walls and sort of gallery constituting the shelter, but we could for that moment discern what each other's face was betraying.

Someone called out, "Holy Jesus, the Fleet's in!"

I coughed out a short laugh, the phrase was inept. Nevertheless the same thought struck me. What else could those explosions be? They indicated heavy gunfire of some kind! Then I listened more carefully. Sure enough there came another tremendous crack of sound. "But what's missing?" Suddenly I realised and formulated a possible explanation. There had

been no whistling preceding the noises; perhaps some of our own bombs had been hit? Which proved, as we discovered later, correct!

The droning receded, and we stepped out. The breezes were swaying the palms by the beach as peacefully as ever.

Bang!

We flung ourselves flat on the ground. After a few moments' silence, everyone got up and dusted their knees.

"If those goddam bombs are goin' off all day long, ah'm quitted!" Jack Gibson roundly declared.

Tex regarded him in comical solemnity. "Are you jest goin' to quit, Gibson?... Why, you cain't do that!"

Jack spluttered, though he well knew Tex was pulling his leg. "Ah mean quit, boy... c'mon now, let's go and reconnoitre those moty boats down ba the shore, just running along to the lighthouse!"

"Bloody good idea!" we agreed.

I found Jim Regis at my shoulder, looking down slant-eyed at me with a shrewd twinkle in his eye. "I'm with you, limey," he bellowed and, half-turning, beckoned, "C'mon, fellers, got to look after ourselves."

As we walked through the well-kept grounds of a large house overlooking the harbour, we caught sight of the boats Jack had in mind, undulating imperceptibly with a slight swell. Our way led us through a giant bulrush-cum-jungly plantation extending a considerable distance along the beach, and then we stepped out on to sand.

I looked down at it curiously. Sand, clean, whitish sand—why, that had no right here, being part of Burma—that belonged to England—to the seaside holidays, to Torquay, Margate, Skegness, Rhyl, the surfing beaches of Cornwall. I shook my head at the incongruity of the thought and followed on. The boys were strolling with apparent nonchalant disinterestedness by a stores hut in which some of the local boatmen were engaged.

Looking back now, I can chuckle at our piratical intentions. They sprang, however, from the natural determination, bred of our existence during the campaign, to fend for ourselves and fight our way out of any trap if necessary. I should say we were Singapore conscious! At any rate, there certainly seemed a number of boats to spare.

I looked at one small sampan appraisingly. "One of these'll do me," I pointed out, "It doesn't need petrol, and there'd be no trouble about starting engines."

So the day dragged on its palpitating way. Away from our squadron, without machines, we not unnaturally felt that nobody bothered about us particularly, nor had the time to sort out our movements. Tommy summed it up, "There's no future for us here, we must get to Calcutta where we can hop a D.C. and ride into China to join up with the boys...that's if they won't let us ride some Hurries in!"

That evening I happened to be sitting on the step of the bay window leading from the mess bar to the garden, talking to Guy and S/L. Elsdon. They were outlining some of their experiences during the two raids, as might be expected, but we were joking and laughing quite a lot. In particular, Guy's description of his evasive action was tremendous. Then Group Captain Singer—he who had eaten with us in our hut at Zaigon and sat with us round the camp-fire, qualling beer—joined us.

S/L. Elsdon mentioned our predicament.

"Well, there'll be room for a couple of pilots on the D.C. to-morrow," the G/C answered. "The rest will have to go up by boat the day after!"

That at least was a definite decision. However, after that, our conversation resumed its lighter tone.

I would like to comment that G/C. Singer, whenever I met him during the campaign, or since, has always been of a jovial, encouraging mien. Like his shrewd contemporary, G/C. Seton Broughall, then handling the show at Magwe, he could always cap a solemnity with a wisecrack.

After having dined with them—don't mistake that word dine, we just ate!—I returned to the billet and told Tommy. He decided that Doug Cropper and myself should go, we being the two married men among our bunch. I objected that that was no basis of selection at all. However, it was left at that. I know now that Tommy sent me off because he was aware of a certain domestic worry that I had been putting aside whilst "on readiness." To get to Calcutta would enable me to communicate home. He has my gratitude.

Then, I made a mental reservation that but for the fact that the others were also going off the day after I would have stayed

with Tommy. And that was sincere enough in my very own conscience; it was just one of those awkward things. In any case, our eagerness to be away was due to our common desire to rejoin the boys—at that very moment wending their way Chinawards. We certainly had not the slightest intention, in what the C.O. always called our “bolshie spirit,” of sitting down and basking in the backwater of Calcutta.

Early next morning, I chucked my few things into my parachute bag and with Doug wended the way to the mess, from whence Guy gave us a lift to the satellite strip at which the transport plane had parked overnight.

There, also, the squadron machines were standing, cold and bedewed, awaiting the morning's raid. As we bumped our way along the rough track leading over paddy walls and across ploughed fields, we perceived their slim noses, defiantly upright still if they were dripping at this hour, gradually materialising out of the morning mist.

The crew of the D.C. were engaged in removing picketing gear. Then they started the engines. One was intractable and as time sped by the mists, in unobtrusive obeisance, departed. Of course the recalcitrant engine did eventually start, with a popping and spluttering, and then the small crowd of us assembled there got inside, including Jim Regis who smuggled himself aboard.

“I’ll be fired if I don’t get back, Red! A fortnight overdue now!” he whispered in my ear. And, anxiously, “Why am I so big?” in such lugubrious tones as he tried to make himself small beside me that I burst our laughing. As we took off I looked out and put my thumb up to Guy.

Losing no time, we next landed at the main aerodrome. There they brought on board Brownie, on a stretcher, just his eyes moving from amidst a crust of blackened flesh. His eyes grinned at me. In addition, there were some wounded soldiers, another wounded pilot, and some ground crew. That D.C. certainly took away a good load.

We chatted off and on to Brownie the whole trip. It was fortunately uneventful, and after taking off the pilot immediately turned right and headed north, climbing gradually. As the heat inside the plane cooled off and the whistling of the air past the ventholes in the windows settled in our consciousness to a

murmuring accompaniment, we glanced out at the Arakan coast— with which I was to become so familiar one year later!

Browne was quite cheerful, and reasonably comfortable. We told him what a pretty sight he looked. "No good making eyes at the nurses, you'll get the bird, limey!" Jim grinned.

Browne muttered, "Don't make me laugh...I'll crack myself!"

The green and brown fields and intricate pattern of waterways of the Sunderbunds drew beneath us; and then we slowly lost height, coming through a succession of small cumulus clouds which bumped us playfully as we sliced through their chunky mass. I caught sight of the lava-like spread of the habitations and factories of Calcutta, and in a few minutes we were adjusting our safety belts for landing.

We stepped out on the tarmac outside the tall Watch Office of Dum Dum airport!

Dazzled somewhat, I looked around, shading my eyes with my hand. The air was moist, it was a warm, Turkish-bath heat, and several officials in neatly pressed khaki drill, some erks, and one or two high-ranking officers, all stared at us curiously. I felt like a somewhat dazed boxer who has just administered a knock-out to his opponent and is looking over the ropes at the audience in that silence as the count proceeds: "One . . . two three..." Perhaps they were thinking, "Hmm, scruffy bastard!" I had my gun, as always, slung at my hip, my red dusty scarf round my neck, no badges of rank, a battered, dusty officer's hat on the back of my head, and probably my knees wanted a wash. What the hell!

Jim bounded down. "Oh Boy! Ooo-ooli B—o—yyy!"

He grabbed my arm. "I'm getting as drunk as a skunk, Red!" he told me, the Watch Office and all the erks working over at the far side of that large aerodrome.

"Right!" I agreed happily, and after making sure Browne was being looked after, we went off in search of a lift to town. After reporting our arrival, we found we had time to call at the "char" room before our transport left for the Grand Hotel. Our scruffy appearance attracted all eyes, then we recognised some of the boys of the squadron who had been with us in Rangoon, and everybody called out a great big "Hello." Thus we had our cup of tea.

Jim became impatient. "Let's git goin', I wanta bath and some booch." And eventually we did clamber aboard a ramshackle omnibus driven by a sleepy Sikh driver.

He drove us past the squalid huts, the shops having yellow meat hanging outside, and the hundred and one little stores, the factories and the slums, all the while threading his way among the horde of coolies, rickshaws, trucks, trams, an occasional bull asleep in the road, with careless accuracy. It was amusing how he tried, by cunning alternation of bulb and electric horns, to frighten the lackadaisical pedestrians into jumping off the road out of our way.

We passed the Black Hole of Calcutta, a row of Chinese shops, and came up Chowringhee to the hotel. What a scene! Bodies, they are nothing more, hardly animate, clothed in rags, lying on a spittle-strewn pavement; a babu clad, incongruously to my unaccustomed vision, in jacket and dhoti, his bare legs showing; an awful, garish, half-caste popsie; a dainty wench clad in a lovely sari; the shopkeepers squatting cross-legged on the counters, three feet from the pavement; young louts, red-mouthed from eating pan; opulent cars of the Europeans...

At the hotel the coolies rushing forward to grab my luggage were bewildered by a sahib bringing only one parachute bag. I looked around at the green expanse of the Maidan, at the dome of the Memorial, at the military folk, clean and pressed, and at the taxis and cars and white women and crowded trams and hundreds of hawkers... It reminded me, despite the heat and dhotis and beggars and the continual rasping spitting sound, of the delight of spending a day in London.

Jim and I strode in and I engaged a room; then he left me temporarily. He had a room at another hotel, and we arranged to meet after a wash. Doug and I signed the register and then followed a page-boy across the lounge.

That was a moment. The fact that I was wearing my precious flying-boots, in addition to previously outlined raffishness, made everyone stare. Doug was as rough—and as impervious to stares.

Seeing all these clean, comfortable folk inclined us, wrongly of course, to put on an "I'm rough and I'm tough, said..." act. Because that major over there, with that slim popsie, and this Flight Lieut. here, with another, because they were

sitting there, drinking whisky and iced soda, talking to real live white women, giving themselves an appetite for lunch and maybe other things, was no cause for our getting stuffy up the nostrils. But then, how logical are we—if ever?

In a half-hour we were downstairs in the bar. Jim's voice could be heard from the lounge as we approached. Doug and I grinned at each other, and I muttered gleefully, "Let battle commence!"

We strode up to the bar, ruthlessly elbowing inoffensive people aside, and, pretending to ignore Jim, loudly called for alcohol. He turned and grinned. The next second my head and shoulders shook almost to disintegration.

"Red, you limey skunk!" yelled Jim, pushing his ham fist through my vertebrae. "Have a drink... *Boy... you, come here... two double ryes!*"

"Uh-uh," muttered Doug, "here we go again!"

I should imagine our appearance in Calcutta was like the cowboys hitting the town in the old days over in the States. Any rate, I was as happy and as irresponsible that afternoon. Maybe it was the strange feeling of peace that helped me cope with the ryes we poured down our throats—and we poured to such good effect we made Jim's hotel for lunch at precisely 4.15 p.m. After a brief interview with the head waiter, which resulted in him agreeing that he didn't want Jim to knock his head off—"Tiffin coming, sir, just this next minute"—we settled down to the best steak, I thought then, I'd tasted for years. As a small decoration, on our plates also were chips, tomatoes, fried onions, eggs, peas, and roast chicken. On another plate we each had rolls and wads of butter!

Jim grinned, his mouth and cheeks bulging incredibly. Looking over, he mumbled affably, "Bloody good chow, old boy, what!"

"Not 'alf, cocker," I retorted, "ye wown't get me on my plates o' meat arter' all this!"

Vaguely he deduced my meaning. "What d'ya mean?" he roared. "We're going out to have another drink after this!"

What a man! but a very good type. We ended up that evening at the Three Zero Zero. Doug was pickled, I was pickled, and Jim was plastered, but by slapping everyone on the back

and generally pushing our noses into all the odd groups of conversationalists, we saw the town, albeit owlishly.

Jim I will always remember. As I said, a great chap, but I don't want a jaunt like that too often—the only suitable training for it would be another campaign.

About four in the morning we got back to our rooms, having had a farewell drink in the lounge of our hotel. I flung myself down on the sheets, Doug managed to turn the fan on before he collapsed too, and then, after tying the walls down to a stationary position, we dozed off to sleep the sleep of a pixilated P/O. Prune.

From outside there was still to be heard the occasional note of a taxi-horn and the life of Calcutta flowed on, evidently, like that of a country at peace. The atmosphere was so very strange. I bethought it was only really an hour or so ago that I had been sleeping in this same hotel on the night before I took the air for Rangoon—so it seemed!

My last conscious impulse was that I must, positively must, send off that cable first thing in the morning.

As we slept and the lights of Calcutta twinkled innocently, somewhere by the side of the Burma road, between Lashio and Loywing, the boys and ground crews were sleeping in the rough! Like a circus on tour!

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During those days in Calcutta while we waited for Hurricanes, we were bemused by the freedom and luxury, like a party of schoolboys come up to town for an outing who had escaped the master's surveillance. I say we, for the next day Gordon Peters and Dough Bailey turned up, having also been flown out to Dum Dum, and Tommy and the rest stalked into the hotel on the third day, March 27. Tommy and his three had gone to Chittagong by boat, and from Chittagong had flown some very teased-out Hurricanes to Dum Dum.

"Ma old engine was poppin' like bad chestnuts!" declared Jack.

We ate the richest mixtures, of course. To be able to sit at table and order an omelette, to have coffee, toast, butter, marmalade, ices, steaks, fish with anchovy sauce, roast duck, chickens . . . um—mmmm! The three Yanks inevitably swamped themselves with ice-water, one of their revolting national

customs which gave me an attack of what is politely called the squitters.

Before dinner, having a hot and cold shower, we would call out to each other, "Hey, fellers, look...real hot water!... look, Tommy, I'm standing under it. .it's *pouring* down!"

Walking arrogantly among the peaceful civilians, we went to the Calcutta Swimming Club and visited all the cinemas. Swimming in the sun, lying by the pool on the greensward with its coloured umbrellas and tables, watching the chattering throng of youth and women, soft-footed bearers bringing us tea, hot toast, iced beer, gave us the greatest pleasure. Not far behind was the joy of going to the box office, getting a ticket, and walking into the cool half-light of a cinema. They were air-conditioned, and to go inside from the humidity and sun and heat of the pavements and highways was like entering a cavern whose moist walls threw off a chill.

Tommy visited H.Q. to find out when we could have machines, otherwise he steered clear of officialdom. Easily we could envisage the possibility, with the welter of aircrew standing round there, of us being posted off to some other unit. I called there, too, chasing up news from home.

It really was a strange hiatus, a bewildering escape from reality. We, having just left such confusion and urgency and tension, could not help feeling most wisely cynical whenever Jim Regis looked round and wisecracked, "All right, fellers, they don't know..." leaning forward with a malevolent grin, "...the Japs'll change all this, won't they, Red! They'll have these bar-stools shortened?"

As somebody nearby would turn his attention on us, with a look of uneasy disapproval, I would reply, loudly, "Yep, they'll have the fans brought down lower, too!"

Calcutta was like London during the first six months of the war.

Visiting Bush and Brownie in hospital kept our minds to our purpose, which was to rejoin the boys and get on with the job—if there was one left to do at the destination to which they were so laboriously travelling!

The first time I walked into the hospital no one said me nay, and indeed I was in no mood to be baulked. Coming to the doorway of a ward, I caught sight of Bush's foot, held in suspension

by a weight and pulley attached to a metal spike sticking through his ankle. Then our eyes met; his face was a uniform pallor, a flat wash of colourless flesh that expressed all the weariness and dull nagging pain that he had endured and was still enduring. But, seeing me, one of the squadron, he grinned and in a soft, hoarse voice, croaked out his delight.

"Here, you old bastard," I shouted, striding across the floor, "beer, Bush...O.K.!"

I clanked down the still ice-cold beer I had bought at a store on my way to the hospital. The nurse, whom I had not observed, merely smiled and paid no attention. That was the height of diplomacy, for I don't think he was allowed beer really.

As I have said, he was so glad to see someone from the squadron, we were talking for hours. Only when it came time for dressings did I depart; and I'm afraid it was because I could sense myself becoming queasy.

Leaving Bush, I walked into the air-conditioned room and spoke to Brownie too. He was much more cheerful; his scabrous skin was black as coal, but he was sitting half upright. He had a bottle of beer on the floor beside the bed, and his recovery was merely a question of time. In my excitement I talked loudly, swore and gesticulated, but the other patients grinned, so I guess I almost succeeded in my intention of being the little ray of sunshine.

Coming out into the open I took a deep breath. Hospitals easily arouse facile emotion, and back at the hotel I think I regarded the drinking, garrulous throng with distaste and disgust. However, two ryes with Jim, whom I met at the bar, diluted my rather foolish intolerance.

A week passed quickly, and with as much excitement, mostly alcoholic, as would have one of the sessions the squadron used to have in the evenings 'way back home. I was asleep on my bed at five on April 2 when Jack woke me to say Tommy was taking six of us to Chittagong and from there on to Loywing. Once again, I and Doug would form a pair, I having to be left in charge! There would be machines for us in a day or two.

That day and the next were ones of frantic taxi-riding hither and thither, between the hotel, H.Q., and Dum Dum. Tommy failed to get away the next morning, and he finally led the boys off on the morning of April 4. All this time there had been no

word from the C.O., and the sudden departure had been the result of a surprise order issued by Wing Commander Pennington Lee.

There was one incident the evening before the boys flew away which made us chuckle, it so recalled days not long past. I had made an inquiry at H.Q. regarding news from home, had gone to see a film with Doug Cropper, and the two of us had sat for a final night-cap in the lounge of the hotel. During the evening we had missed Tommy and the others.

It was midnight approximately—and the sirens suddenly wailed !

We looked at each other. "This is no place for us !" Quietly we set down our glasses and walked out of the hotel on to the Maidan. We could hear the note of an aircraft above, somewhere, but I was sure it was one of ours. Nevertheless, surveying the grass and avenues of trees and intersecting roads of the Maidan, revealed in dim outline by a pale moon, we used our acute sense of the best position to be in and selected a slit trench. It was naturally in the middle of the area, guarded by a ditch rampart lining the adjacent road and well away from the buildings overlooking the fields.

Five minutes later we heard someone coming towards us. He was running, and we could hear his deep breathing. I suddenly chuckled, "Tommy !"

Blow me down, we had one hell of a laugh about the way we bombees had all arrived at the same slit trench.

The raid did not materialise, and not long after the "All Clear" sounded. We walked back slowly across the grass into the hotel, and to bed. When I awoke next morning, my eye sleepily watched the fan revolving above me, then I looked to the other beds. Tommy and the boys were on their way !

* * *

Slim Lewis, one winter's evening in my quarters at the foot of the Afghan ranges, sat and talked, and together we assembled the jigsaw of all his memories and of the jokes and incidents that Ricky, the C.O., Sam, Tex, Allan MacDou', Ken Wheatley, and the rest had let slip when the squadron was cursing the prickly heat in Bengal, after walking and flying out of China.

Following the Burma Road, the squadron convoy had driven out of Magwe early on March 23, and had got to the heated,

dusty, plodding frame of mind as the Japs were hailing Akyab. That night the sixty-odd vehicles drove into the fort at Mandalay and the men had slept well. Off again not long after dawn the next morning, they had snaked their way up the road to Maymo, and had halted there for the usual char. So, fulfilling the C.O.'s plan to drive up to China and carry on fighting the Japs, they plodded on to make Lashio the second night.

After two days' hard activity, the results of Ricky's organisation at Magwe were becoming apparent. The nondescript collection of vehicles he had, euphemistically, scrounged and over which the M.T. crews had laboured indefatigably, improvising spares more often than not, were still sound. Not only were they carrying men, but they hauled spare wings, and a host of smaller aircraft parts, as well as petrol, oil, bowsters.

With a grin of appreciation, Slim recalled that at Lashio the menu had been much improved, for there they had been able to buy cans and cans of peaches, milk, fish, beans, tomatoes, everything except the bully that had constituted everyone's meal during the journey up till then. Stopping with the trucks and cars hidden in the shade of convenient trees by the wayside, bully, plus hard tack, and tea had been handed out three times a day.

At Lashio they had comfortable R.A.F. barracks to sleep in, so after a wash in the evening they had joined the A.V.G. in a P.U. Walking to a Chinese restaurant, they had clattered up wooden, rickety stairs to a room clean and neat for all that the tables were not horizontal and the floorboards worn. Some pretty little Chinese girls had rushed round with a belly-stuffing chop-suey dinner; they had drunk a lot of whisky or gin; and one of the crks, Corporal "Tubby" Gibson, had brought out his "squeeze" box, a precious accordion, and had stood up when the air was thick with smoke and talk and nonsense to give them an impromptu concert.

They were far from home, those British lads—"China's just a big lump on the map, ehum!"—but they were men banded together by courage and sweat and bomb fragments and oil and, most of all, a squadron spirit! They were happy in their work!

Next move was on up the Burma Road, through country that was now becoming more hilly as they persisted this way and

that towards the China border and Shan States. I wonder what jocular description came to the lips of the Cockneys of the squadron as they gazed for the first time on the tattooed inhabitants, who punctured their skins to such good effect, only a searching glance could tell their naked legs were not actually stockinged!

Half-way between Lashio and Loywing, which latter had an aerodrome used by the A.V.C., inside the border of China, and which boasted of an aircraft assembly plant, the convoy was confronted by a river and a bridge. It was late in the day, the men were tired and the overhead girders of the bridge obviously would not permit Sam's Orderly Room trailer and the trucks carrying the spare wings to pass. The C.O. looked around, saw the ground and surroundings were pleasant enough, and decided to leave the exasperating unloading and reloading necessary to negotiate the bridge until morning.

Everyone cheerfully made camp. Some arranged a bed-place in their truck, others flung blankets on a grass patch. What with the canned food and the bully—and in spite of an unsuccessful attempt to fish in the river—each man went to sleep content.

Not that they were bemused by the fresh air and satisfaction of a full stomach into forgetting their purpose. Slim remarked, "And as we sat round a camp-fire, we looked up and saw all round us a ring of eight fires in the trees and bush on top of the hills. We knew damn well what they signified—that was the same old fifth column stunt that we'd met down south!"

That was the night, too, that I had slept on cool, clean sheets, under a fan, ice-water to hand, a soft pillow under my head, and the fumes of many ryes in my brain!

They all worked and cursed hard the next morning. After driving every vehicle that could be got without hindrance across the bridge, they brought dozens of the men back to stand on the running boards of the trailer, on the bonnet, on the back step, to cling anywhere where there was a foothold, and so they reduced its height. The roof of the trailer then just cleared the girders; but the wings had to be unloaded, manhandled across the bridge, and then reloaded again.

Towards the end of that day, along the road they caught sight of the Chinese guards standing by the bridge leading over the

river to the border, and the convoy's journey was, for a while, at an end.

Ricky was chuckling with pride. The only car that had given any trouble had been the Plymouth I had swopped for a jeep at Magwe. They had swung round the hundred and one irritating bends of the Burma Road, they had surveyed pagodas in rivers, on hills, had gazed at scrub and grass and lovely hill country, and had drunk reservoirs full of char; and they squatted down with a sigh of almost browned-off relief.

Slim remembered that the squadron did not have quarters actually in China, but billeted in an Army outpost barracks at a small point the Burma side of the river called Pangkani. To reach the aerodrome they had to drive each dawn over the river bridge and eight miles farther up the road. Their quarters were rough, there were naturally not enough beds, but the pilots made themselves content and cheerful. For a bed, Ken Wheatley, and many others, banged together two poles of bamboo and cross-pieces, lashed a blanket to the poles and then rested the improvised mattress on four empty petrol tins.

"Trouble with that kind of bed though," Slim grinned, "was that just as you were getting off to sleep, someone would come and kick a petrol tin away!"

Their grub was good. Slim reminisced about the flapjacks he had cooked and served out with honey. These additions to the rations which were brought every day by truck from Bhamo, and the purchases made in the nearby village of Manwing, gave them a plentiful variety of food.

The A.V.G., who had a most comfortable mess in Loywing town, were always friendly and hospitable. The boys would often go there of an evening and see a movie and to savour the comfort of the polished wood floors, rugs, refrigerators, bar, electric light, all of which made the Americans happily self-contained.

At other times, assuming there was no readiness to do, and this was inevitable because of the limited number of machines, the boys would go hunting for game in the forested slopes, or fishing in the river. Then, in the evening, they would hold an impromptu concert, all the erks sitting round a camp-fire, their faces showing dusky red in the flames and their lips opening wide with spontaneous mirth. Stinker, the quiet one, had a great act. He would stride into view twanging a banjo of some kind and singing in

excellent nursery of George Formby. At the end, he would turn and go off, revealing the portable gramophone strapped on his back!

The aerodrome at Loywing had a main runway, two hundred yards wide, that had been bull-dozed out of the hillside. The other intersecting, short runway was seldom, if ever, used. There was also a very short satellite strip, 600 yds. long, on which the boys used to smack down the Hurricanes some nights for dispersal. At the main aerodrome, on readiness, they had the same kind of bamboo "basher" as we had had at Mingaladon.

One good thing was the excellent warning system provided by the wireless and telephone communications with Chinese look-outs on the surrounding hills. Our handicap was that we had no Ops. control: once in the air we had to stalk the enemy by guess or by God! Over that new sector of hills and universal forested declivities and valleys, when with engine hours more precious than rubies, it was impossible to fly daily and familiarise oneself with the landmarks, the pilots' task was not easy!

Tommy told me that was his thought when he and the boys flew in with the eight Hurricanes on April 5, coming from Calcutta *via* Chittagong, Imphal and the Chin Hills. Everyone was immensely heartened at the arrival of some machines, and the crews rushed at the servicing of them. Just about then, too, the Japs, probing for us over Burma with their long-range bombers like the tentacles of an octopus, started to pay attention to Loywing.

On one occasion the boys scrambled and climbed high, the telephone message having been that the enemy was coming round at about 16,000 ft. Then, in the air, silence. The Hurricanes swung this way and that at 20,000, searching, searching, till the pilots' eyeballs seemed as though they would burst under the strain of concentration, but, "No dice!"

When they eventually landed they found the valley littered with pranged Jap kites. The Japs had come in low, at 8,000 ft., and the A.V.G., being radio-controlled, of course came down on them and had the party all to themselves. The C.O., I remember, remarked once what a lovely sight it had been. He had grinned and chuckled over the memory. "One second there was a guttural drone and there were the Jap bombers and fighters,

next a bloody great roar and the Tomahawks came sliding down, filling the valley with sound and pranged Japs !”

We were more fortunate than the A.V.G., though, on another occasion. Ricky padded into the C.O.’s room one morning at the break of dawn and shook him.

“Don’t look now, sir, but I think there are some Japs about !”

The two of them got up and went out on to the veranda. There, they watched eight OIs, playing follow-my-leader with great impudence, strafe the newly-arrived Kittihawks on the runway. But, as a comment on the Japs’ lousy strafing marksmanship, only two of those dozen or so Kittihawks were not flying by the end of that day ! A Blenheim which was awaiting a new tailwheel was badly damaged, however ; and the spare tailwheel was flown in from India a few hours later !

However, the boys met the Japs another time, Slim remembered, approximately the 12th of April. There was one hell of a shambles over the valley, and Gordon Peters was well and truly blitzed by an OI that jumped him out of the sun. He managed to bale out, but “Poor old Gordon was very upset to think that had happened to him !”

Tex Barriek slipped up, nearly fatally. Having sent down one fighter in flames, he thought to himself—here is his own account : “Ah was determined to see one of the little bastards hit the deck, and Ah was circling round him as we went down when, Lord A’mighty, somethin’ hit me !”

He had been jumped in turn and, after seeing his instrument readings fluctuate to the most alarming temperatures and pressures, he had slammed the Hurricane down and ploughed it into the side of a hill. The jarring of the force-landing, or perhaps his head hitting the sight, resulted in his sitting in the cockpit like a drunken fowl, until he noticed the locals shouting at him and beckoning skywards. At that he clambered out of the machine and ran for dear life. His late opponent came down and strafed the broken Hurricane.

Someone who saw the wreckage afterwards said Tex was a lucky man—everything but the cockpit, or the air where the cockpit was, had been pulverised or shot to pieces. They first heard of his whereabouts when the A.V.G. telephoned that they’d picked him up. News of Gordon came through from Namkam Hospital !

Of the others, Frank Earnshaw and Jack Gibson got one apiece, and the A.V.G. accounted for four.

On the next occasion only three machines took the air, with Ricky, Snooks Everard, and Allan MacDou'. Thus was the 13th. The boys had to get above cloud and they went south-east, searching and weaving in anticipation of the likely track of the raiders. They had no luck, and then after well over an hour's flying turned around for base. Their petrol began to run low. For quite a while they had seen no gap in the lovely but treacherous white cloud, only at intervals there would appear the ranges, the cloud swirling around the peaks as water swirls from the back of a submarine when it surfaces.

To go down through that probably would have resulted in three deaths. As Ricky remarked, "We could see the mountain-mist hillside-crash gremlins dancing up and down on the peaks—they must have flown all the way from Scotland for the job!"

Luckily, they found a gap in the clouds, and with great relief plunged down into the valleys below. Next, not knowing where they were, only realising that having come out on a south-easterly course, they must head back north-west, they hopefully emulated the homing pigeon. When their gauges were showing about five gallons in each main tank—and think how long it would take a 1,250 h.p. engine to gulp down that!—they espied fields by the river below. Allan and Snooks promptly parked their aircraft, wheels up in approved fashion, one on either side of the river. Ricky, having just a little more petrol in his tanks, carried on.

He made it! Ironically, the aerodrome was just ten miles away and maybe the other two might have reached it.

Which illustrates the point I made about the difficulties of flying over that country, plus the snags of having no R/T, and not daring to waste flying time on familiarisation flights. It was just one of those things.

A very browned-off C.O. then flew back to Calcutta to scrounge a few more Hurricanes.

I learned of the C.O.'s arrival from Basil Rathbone, who was also in town, having been sent back some time previous. It was in the evening, and I telephoned the C.O. at the Great Eastern Hotel.

"Hello, Ken—poor old squadron's in the mire again, old

boy!" His voice and the familiar chuckle came through the wire cheerfully enough, however, and he went on to recount their adventures. We arranged to meet the next morning.

When I met him on April 14, the first thing we did was to have a hang-over draught. Then to Group, and eventually we sat down to lunch at Firpo's. Over the details I will lay a thick blanket—two blankets, in fact. Suffice to say, that we started with two prairie oysters which nearly blew our heads off, and then proceeded in frivolous decapitation *via* the Grand to Three Zero Zero. I last saw him playing the fruit machine.

To sum up, I now had no chance of rejoining the boys in China; on the contrary, he would be flying back merely to get the whole squadron out! Which was gloomily confirmed when I saw him off on the 16th.

At Loywing they then had, Slim believed, two serviceable Hurricanes left out of the original eight. One used to be flown daily to Lashio aerodrome where the P.R.U. unit was operating, and there it was used as a reconnaissance machine, not as a fighter. A pity! Slim said the boys had been enthusiastic at the prospect of carrying on with the A.V.G.; but it could not be, no machines could be spared from the defence of India.

On April 20 the C.O. sent off by Blenheim, Tommy, Snooks, Owen Reid, Warburton, and Stinker, all of whom I met in the hotel by chance. On the 26th, the rest flew back as well. Allan MacDon' missed that Blenheim, as he had returned late from Lashio, being the pilot that day to take the Hurricane down—and the machine had given up the ghost there. Thus the final party that walked and crawled the vehicles to Myitkyina aerodrome, on the way to Assam, consisted of the C.O., Sam, Allan, and the ground crews, Nickhole, our I.O., and the Doc, F/Lt. Nicholls. He was not our squadron Doc, but in the shuffling from Magwe upwards had become so.

Their journey led them along a road, so-called, considerably more circuitous than the Burma Road and consisting mostly of a mere cart-track. At times they had to urge their vehicles through fords of unpredictable, malevolent beds. Time and again a truck would sink to the axles in soft earth, and painstakingly they would hack down bamboo to make holdings from the clusters in the thickets and profuse scrub and vegetation through



Up the Burma Road



The Doc got his ambulance stuck !



The Bitter End - Emplaning at Myitkyina.

which the trail was leading them. There was a moment containing all the distilled browned-offness of their worries, an hour-glass for a second pouring nitro-glycerine, when the Doc himself got his own truck-cum-ambulance stuck in a ford. But they carried on, of course, through really lovely country, hilly, wooded, magnificent in prospect, a contrast to the dusty flatness of Magwe, and finally reached Myitkyina.

There came the final blow. The men spat as they learned they were to be flown out, and that all the vehicles and kit and gear they had so laboriously manhandled along the trail would have to be destroyed!

That they would willingly have tramped on shows their spirit. Here let me pay tribute to those Cockneys and Cambrians, men bred in the shade of a Martello tower, and men with the smell of heather and white and red roses, the tang of the Fens, the smell of Welsh coal dust and the free air of the West country in their nostrils!

On the baked flatness of the airfield they stuffed in their pockets what few precious possessions they had brought from home half round the world. In like manner, they were packed into the transport plane.

Back in Calcutta, the C.O., Sam, everyone, wallowed in the delight of hot baths, good food... Sam told me the C.O. had said to them all, "Now go and have a bloody good rest—but mind, not too many blacks!"

They did. Rieky and the others were already knocking hell out of Darjeeling. After all, an order's an order!

Bush was awarded the D.F.C. and Tex Barnick received the D.F.M.

CHAPTER XI

A SCORE SETTLED

...and then we were nosing down, down, down into Burma, the Chindwin and Irrawaddy discernible as ichorous veins in the brown parchment of this body of Burma. There was the same old haze, not so thick as I had known it once. I looked

down at the trees scattered among the scrub, the sandy soil, the constantly appearing white pagodas.

As we roared over the country it was almost a shock to see the Burmese, whom we could pick out quite clearly, going about their daily toil just as they had done before the Japanese occupation, when they had only glanced flatly at us from the top of a bullock-cart. The Irrawaddy was etched in limpid brilliance and colour, and I thought what a typical picture it would be to send home.

We began to near our objective. I tried to check our course. Poor Dimsie, he's got that worry...there's old Chota...look, down there, hell...an armoured car, surely...get it on the way back...

Came Dimsie's voice over the R/T. and, looking right, I saw something bound along the ground and burst into flames. That was Tony, had he been shot at? Next second I realised, grinning at myself in my mind's view, it had been his long-range tanks exploding as they hit the earth. I dropped mine...that was good, free of that encumbrance.

The road we were to follow to bring us within sight of the aerodrome came in view. Over to the left, far enough to give it that perspective of unreality, was rising a huge cloud of smoke where the Blenheims had been bombing another of the Jap aerodromes. Then we came across the Meiktila drome suddenly, like turning a corner and finding oneself in the midst of a street fight.

Dimsie had had to swing right, then left, we bunched up slightly. I yelled out, "Get out of my bloody way, Chota."

...now, this was it, this was the time, remember, the left of the aerodrome as we approach—one gunpost...down, get down...on the deck...oh, Jesus, let's get something...

I pushed the throttle right forward. In the next second, momentarily I felt suspended, like a kingfisher staring down on the traffic of a stream.

Ahead of me an aircraft suddenly zoomed up, stall turned, smoking...Christ, their fighters are up already...and then dive down into the ground with a flame and a crash which I could not bear, but I could hear. It was as if the pilot wished savagely to immolate himself.

Then I was rushing forward again, curiously, coldly busy,

quite detached...low, open fire, here are the pens...oh, rat it, they're empty...follow Dimsie, he's going right...squirt those sheds...ah—the bastards...round, round, keep going, son, keep going..." Away I swerved, jinking, clumping, side-slipping for fear of those ack-ack guns, all the time anticipating a clang in the cockpit like a spinster fearing a baby.

"Oh, boy!" As I turned back, there was a goods train standing along the railway line. I whipped up the nose, kicked on rudder and held the sight on, seeing the flashes all over the vans like a shower of molten metal drops dancing in a foundry... held it until the tree to one side and the vans were too big in my sight, then leaned and heaved back on the stick. Cheerrrump! Belund me the palm trees swayed and rustled as though a sudden, brief squall had overtaken them.

Then we were away, plus sight, engines throbbing away... don't fail me, son—keep goin', old-timer...and all the while over the R/T. were coming almost insane cackles of glee. Some of the boys had caught the Japs at the other end of the drome with props whirling in the moment before take-off. "Whippooo" and "Wacco" I heard, as I stretched my skin in a grin.

Down at tree-top height, curving and jinking, looking out for other targets, we went. After about five minutes the two of us, and another pair, came to the low hill on our track, rising from the scrub and arid country like a blind boil, and we circled there in an awful few moments of doubt, wondering whether we had lost anybody.

No, four more machines came in sight quite soon, speeding over the ground like hares on the run, and difficult to pick out because of their camouflage. We swung in with them and then we were on our way back, constantly shrieking our necks this way and that in case we had been followed. As we were half-way up that drawn-out, grinding climb to surmount the ranges again, there came a cackle over the R/T. Up there in the cool heights once more, but still with our armpits and backs and seats damp with the sweat of tension and excitement, we gnattered away.

"Hey, who got that one?"

The voices came queerly as though off-stage to an empty theatre. Down below, the green of the jungle and the placid hutments slumbered on.

"Willy, I think!"

Another voice. "Yes, it was Willy!"

"Oh, bloody good... *Waceo... Pupp!*" Which was a queer New Zealand whoop of triumph the squadron had adopted.

The knowing that all your comrades were returning with you was warming as a rare vodka; the revenge extracted for a previous slight was satisfaction good as that of a sniper in the killing.

One of the boys started to sing to himself, and partly for our benefit. He hummed a Maori haka. We joined in. Then, because of a deep feeling not a bit of use arguing about, we started to sing, "There'll always be an England!" Looking at it now as I type it could be interpreted cheaply—but that was how we felt. We hoped the Japs would be listening to us!

Our combat report read: Destroyed—Four Army Ois. Four more badly damaged. Railway train, motor car, aerodrome, road workers and bullock-carts, dispersal huts and stores, shot up. P/Lt. Stones wounded in left thigh. Red 2 (P/Sgt. Muggleton) one .5 bullet pierced perspex and longeron.

That was the last time I saw Burma!

